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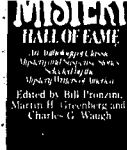
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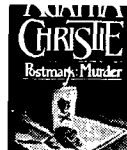
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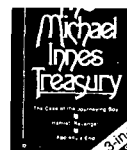
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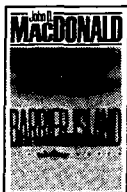
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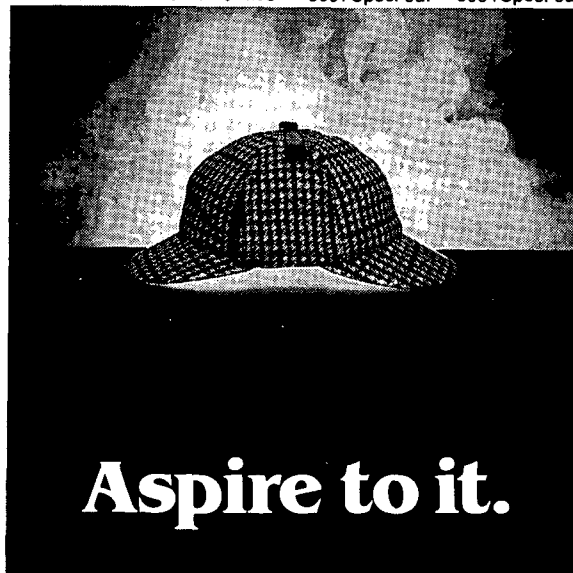
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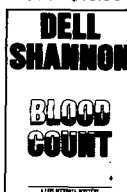
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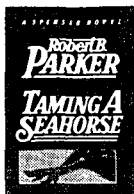
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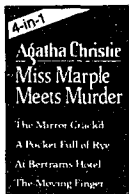
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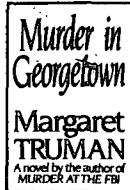
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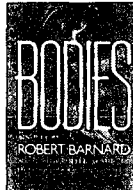
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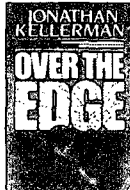
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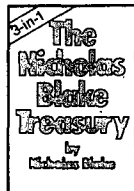
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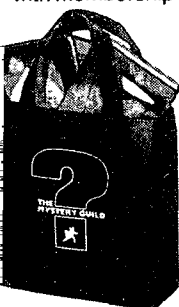


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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

For the third year in a row, we are delighted to say, a story first published in AHMM has won the Robert L. Fish Memorial Award for Best First Mystery Story. This time the prize went to Mary Kittredge's "Father to the Man," which appeared in AHMM in November 1986.

Our heartiest congratulations to Ms. Kittredge!

We should mention, by the way, that her first mystery novel, *Murder in Mendocino*, has recently been published by Walker. *Publishers Weekly* called it a "satisfying complex mystery" and her heroine, Charlotte, "a bright addition to the roster of female detective figures at work and play in the Pacific Northwest."

The Robert L. Fish Award is traditionally presented on the Saturday following the Edgar Awards banquet in New York, and the presentation is made by the previous year's winner—in this case our own Doug Allyn. Allyn, it turns out, was also a nominee this year for Best Short Story of 1986, for "Puddle Diver," from our October issue!

The Edgars were presented

this year on May 8th, at the Sheraton Centre Hotel as usual, with the Grand Master award going to Michael Gilbert. The list of nominees and winners follows, with the winners in bold-face type.

BEST NOVEL OF 1986:

***A Dark-Adapted Eye* by Ruth Rendell as Barbara Vine (Bantam)**

Blind Run by Brian Freemantle (Bantam)

Come Morning by Joe Gores (Mysterious Press)

A Taste for Death by P.D. James (Knopf)

The Straight Man by Roger L. Simon (Villard)

BEST FIRST NOVEL OF 1986:

***No One Rides for Free* by Larry Beinhart (Morrow)**

Lost by Gary Devon (Knopf)

Riceburner by Richard Hyer (Scribner's)

Floater by Joseph Koenig (Mysterious Press)

Dead Air by Mike Lupica (Villard)

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL NOVEL OF 1986:

***The Junkyard Dog* by Rob-**

ert Campbell (Signet)*The Cat Who Saw Red* by Lilian Jackson Braun (Jove)*Hazzard* by R.D. Brown (Bantam)*Ronin* by Nick Christian (Tor)*Shattered Moon* by Kate Green (Dell)

BEST SHORT STORY OF 1986:

"Rain in Pinton County" by Robert Sampson (New Black Mask 5)*"Christmas Cop"* by Thomas Adcock (EQMM)*"The Puddle Diver"* by Doug Allyn (AHMM)*"Driven"* by Brendan DuBois (EQMM)*"Body Count"* by Wayne D. Dundee (*Mean Streets*, The Mysterious Press)

BEST JUVENILE NOVEL OF 1986:

The Other Side of Dark* by Joan Lowery Nixon (Delacorte)The Skeleton Man* by Jay Bennett (Watts)*The Secret Life of Dilly McBean* by Dorothy Haas (Bradbury Press)*The Bodies in the Bessledorf Hotel* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor (Atheneum)*Floating Illusions* by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro (Harper & Row)

BEST FACT CRIME OF 1986:

Careless Whispers* by Carlton Stowers (Taylor)Incident at Big Sky* by Johnny France and Malcolm McConnell (Norton)*Unveiling Claudia* by Daniel Keyes (Bantam)*Wiseguy* by Nicholas Pileggi (Simon & Schuster)*The Poison Tree* by Alan Pendergast (Putnam)

BEST CRITICAL/BIOGRAPHICAL WORK OF 1986:

Here Lies* by Eric Ambler (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)The Secret of the Stratemeyer Syndicate* by Carol Billman (Ungar)*The Mystery Lover's Companion* by Art Bourgeau (Crown)*13 Mistresses of Murder* by Elaine Budd (Ungar)*1001 Midnights* by Bill Pronzini and Marcia Muller (Arbor)

BEST MOTION PICTURE SCREENPLAY OF 1986:

Something Wild*, screenplay by E. Max Frye (Orion)Name of the Rose*, screenplay by Andrew Birkin, Gerard Brach, Howard Franklin, and Alain Godard, based on the book by Umberto Eco (20th Century Fox)
The Great Mouse Detective, screenplay by Ron Clements, Pete Young, et al., based on the book *Basil of Baker Street* by Eve Titus (Disney)*Manhunter*, screenplay by Michael Mann, based on the book *Red Dragon* by Thomas Harris

(De Laurentiis Entertainment Group)

F/X, screenplay by Robert T. Megginson & Gregory Fleeman (Orion)

Defense of the Realm, screenplay by Martin Stellman (Hemdale Releasing)

BEST TELEFEATURE OF 1986:

When the Bough Breaks, written by Phil Penningroth (NBC)

The Deliberate Stranger, written by Hesper Anderson (NBC)

The Sword of Gideon, written by Chris Bryant (HBO Pictures)

Perry Mason: Case of the Shoot-

ing Star, written by Anne C. Collins (NBC)

One Police Plaza, written by Paul King (CBS)

BEST EPISODE IN A TELEVISION SERIES OF 1986:

"The Cup," from *The Equalizer*, written by David Jackson and Carleton Eastlake (CBS)

"Diary of a Perfect Murder," from *Matlock*, written by Dean Hargrove (NBC)

"Deirdre," from *The New Mike Hammer*, written by Herman Miller (CBS)

"Wax Poetic," from *Blacke's Magic*, written by Lee Sheldon (NBC)

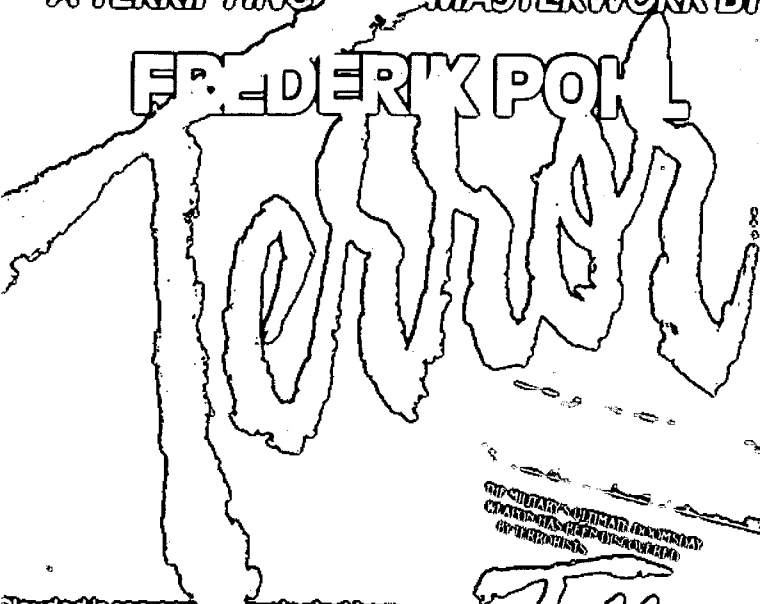
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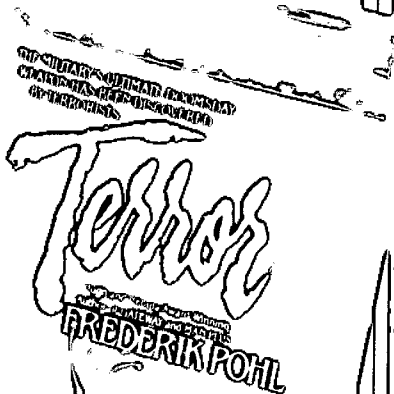


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FICTION

Mel's Rent-All

by David Pierce



“E xcuse me, sir. But I said wouldn’t you be interested in a new hand? You know, one with five fingers.” The short, squatty man behind the counter of Mel’s Rent-All held his own right hand up by his face and wiggled his fingers sarcastically. At least I thought he was being sarcastic at the time.

I had lost three fingers on my right hand fifteen years ago when I was nineteen. Right

after high school I went to work for a place that made water heaters. One day my foreman sent me over to the steel-punch machine to fill in while Walter Clark took a ten minute break.

Hell, I didn’t know any more about the punch press than what I had seen while passing by. It jammed up on me the first thing, and when I tried to pull out the wedged piece of steel—*whap*—right on my hand. I lost my middle finger, ring fin-

ger, and little pinky. I got three thousand bucks, though, a thousand bucks a finger (I was surprised a pinky brought as much as a middle finger). And Walter Clark felt so bad he put my fingers in a jar and buried them out behind the plant. From then on, every time it got cold, the nubs hurt like hell.

I was extremely self-conscious about my hand. I usually kept it balled up in what looked like a fist. Hardly noticeable. Or I kept it in my pocket or tucked behind my back. But this irksome salesman was talking about it like I could pick one up at the supermarket.

"Since you're new here, I'll make you a special deal: two days at no cost. You like it, maybe we can work up a rent-to-own deal." Short-and-squatty was grinning proudly. His eyes nearly squinted shut when he did that, leaving two little slits that looked like coin slots in a vending machine. And I remember wondering if he intentionally put that much oil on his hair. His flippancy about my hand was starting to piss me off.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I said a little louder than I meant to. Luckily no one else was in the store.

He held up both hands defensively. "Hey, I'm just trying to make a sale. And to please you

so you'll come back and maybe do more business." He pointed to my hand.

"We're talking about fingers!" I waved my nubs in front of his face.

He nodded and grinned proudly. "The sign says *anything*, right? Well, make your choice." He was grinning so big now I couldn't see his eyeballs at all.

"Okay, give me a damn hand to go and hold the mayo." It was my turn to be sarcastic.

He offered a reproachful frown before he disappeared through a curtained doorway that led to a back room.

I laughed when he had gone, more in frustration at myself for sticking around and not getting the heck out of there. I had a lot of work to do. If I had thought for one minute he was just making fun of my missing fingers, I'd have decked him with a good left and then gouged out his squinty eyes with my lone finger and thumb.

I checked out the machine I had come to rent in the first place, trying to convince myself that I was just making sure all the hoses and attachments were there and that I wasn't curious about what might come back through the curtain. It was Sunday afternoon and Millie had me stripping twenty-year-old wallpaper off the bedroom

wall. This machine was supposed to make it easier for the wallpaper to peel off. Save time. Either way, I was missing the Bears and Packers game. That pissed me off, too. Sometimes that woman—

"Here we go." It was the short, squatty salesman coming back through the curtain triumphantly. "I believe I have just what you need. He was carrying a tower of wobbling shoeboxes before him and had one tucked under each arm.

"Listen," I made an intimidating fist with my left hand. "If this is some idea of a joke, then I won't hesitate—"

"This is no joke," he cut me off sternly. Each word was like icy steel. "Think of this as nothing more than a sales promotion. You like our business, then you'll come back. Maybe bring some friends." His eyes were big and round, somber. Not a single muscle on his face worked for a smile. "Now, let me see your hand."

I'm still not sure why I held my hand out to him. I think he hypnotized me with that stony seriousness. At any rate, I held out my hand. He took it like a shoe salesman, turned his back to me, and locked my hand and wrist under his armpit. I watched nervously, ready to pull back at the first sign of any funny business. He took some-

thing from the box and, his back still to me, acted as if he were slipping something over my hand. Unbelievable pain shot up my arm and held me like an electrical shock. I writhed helplessly as the salesman worked unconcerned. I couldn't scream because my throat had closed up tight, swollen shut. I couldn't even breathe. Then suddenly it stopped. I gasped for air and stood there as weak as a kitten. My hand was still a prisoner.

"There," he said finally as he released my hand and stepped aside, turning back to face me. I pulled it up close to me. It was tingling as if it were waking up from a long sleep. Thousands of needles tapdanced on the front and back, nothing painful. I raised my hand until it was only inches from my nose and stared at it unbelievably. Slowly and deliberately I unfolded each finger, one at a time. They tingled pleasingly with every movement. I gaped in amazement at the salesman.

"How does it fit?" he asked.

I shook my head in disbelief. "How does it look?"

"Great." He gave me the thumbs-up sign. "Like I said. Use it. Try it out for two days. You like it, come on back and we'll take care of all the paperwork." He slipped me a business card and his eyes turned

into squinty coin slots again.

I was in such shock I couldn't say anything else. As I left I could only wave mechanically with my new fingers.

I left the wallpaper stripper at Mel's Rent-All. Hell, I just got a new hand. I knew that you could ruin a new paint job on a car if you washed it too soon from the factory. I thought it possible my new hand might fall off if I took it home and worked it too hard right away. Give it time.

Millie let me know that she didn't like the not working idea too much. I promised myself I wouldn't strain my hand, at least no time soon, but damned if I hadn't been home an hour before I strangled Millie. It was fast and effortless and I did it all with my new hand. Once again I held it before my face and flexed it slowly. Boy, was I happy.

The first thing I thought about while Millie's lifeless body lay on the floor before me was, What am I going to tell her parents? They were supposed to be over that night for supper.

I wrapped her body in a blanket, dragged it out the back door, and made sure no nosy neighbors were around. I was so glad to be able to push and pull with my hand that hadn't done much more in the last fif-

teen years than button a shirt. And the shovel felt so good in my hands that I dug the hole two feet deeper than I needed to.

When I was back in the house I searched around in my jacket until I found the business card. MEL'S RENT-ALL. *Mel Hossman, Owner.* The man said they rent anything. I figured I'd give it a shot.

“Your wife?” Mel asked over the top of a five by seven snapshot I had handed him. Mel turned out to be the short, squatty man with oily hair and squinty eyes.

“Yeah, how'd you—”

“Common request,” he answered automatically and continued to study the photograph. “Her name's Millie?”

“Hey, how'd—”

“It's on the back of the photo,” he said and flipped it over to prove it.

“Okay, sorry.” Nervously I knitted my old fingers with my new ones and allowed him time to think. “Well? What about it? Is it possible?”

“Sure. But it's gonna cost you.”

“No problem,” I assured him, somewhat relieved. He grinned and the eyes squinted familiarly.

“How tall?”

"Pardon?"

"How tall is she? Hard to tell in the picture."

"Oh, five five, I believe."

"Weight?"

"Ah... one forty-five, I think—no wait—one thirty." As long as I was making the decisions, why not?

"Okay, give me a minute," he said as he turned and left. He kept his eyes glued to the photograph, feeling along with one hand as he disappeared behind the curtain.

No more than five minutes passed before Mel flipped open the curtain and triumphantly announced: "May I present your wife, Millie." And he wafted an arm graciously towards the doorway.

"Oh, there you are," her squeaky voice came in before her. "You take me home right now. Mother and Father will be in soon and my house is a wreck."

Surely to goodness it was Millie, as alive as she had been only five minutes before I had killed her (except fifteen pounds lighter).

"Are you going to stand there with your lip on the ground all day? Now let's get." She ushered me toward the door.

"But, Mr. Hossman," I gestured toward Mel. "I need to pay—"

"That's okay. You'll be back,"

Mel predicted. "Enjoy." He waved friendly-like and once again the squint as my new Millie led me out.

The new Millie was an incredible reproduction. She walked like Millie.

Talked like Millie. Bit her lip when she vacuumed, scurried and nagged like Millie. I'd have thought I dreamed all the other had I not been able to make a shadow of a rabbit on the wall in a beam of afternoon sunshine with my new fingers. Or look out the window and see the freshly dug earth about a hundred feet away at the back edge of the property line (right next to the garbage cans).

She even fooled Millie's parents when they finally arrived for supper. My rental equipment hugged them both as I took their coats. I offered my obligatory "Howdy-do's," started to help her father to the living room, and then remembered how he hated that.

Millie's mother asked her about her new diet, but my Millie just laughed it off and led her back to the kitchen. Her mom's squeaky voice carried into the living room and penetrated the TV roar of a partisan Chicago crowd at Soldier Field. She was saying something about still having that tacky wallpaper up in the bedroom.

Her Dad (I always referred to Millie's parents as Her Dad and Her Mom or Mr. Warpool and Mrs. Warpool) was quickly engrossed in the Bears and Packers war on the tube. The Bears were up by a touchdown late in the third quarter. Her Dad was okay. We had a couple of things in common, things we could relate to fully; football was one.

"Come on, Harold," Mrs. Warpool called. "Turn off that ball game and come eat this delicious-looking dinner your daughter cooked for us. You are so lucky, Charles," she said to me and patted my cheeks roughly (she knew I hated that). She pushed the on/off button on the TV. There was a static *pop* and the screen went black. Mr. Warpool grumbled, labored to get up from the overstuffed couch, and made it to the dining room table. The squash casserole was too salty and the green beans were too greasy—just like Millie's.

After dinner Mr. Warpool went back into the living room, turned on the TV, and sank back into the sofa. It was late in the fourth quarter. The Bears were down by a field goal and driving. He tried not to act too excited for fear of Mrs. Warpool. She had her sensors on, and if she thought he were enjoying himself too much, she'd change that in a hurry.

"Now, Harold. We didn't come down to gawk at the tube all night," she caught him. "We can do that at home. Let's enjoy each other's company. Come on, let's play cards. Charles," she called to me, "do you still remember how to play canasta? Come on." She turned the set off on fourth-and-one. Mr. Warpool started to say something but then stopped when she gave him a look I couldn't see from where I sat. She flew back into the kitchen, her broom indiscernible, and asked Millie the whereabouts of the canasta cards.

Mr. Warpool labored up from the couch again, his face reddened with anger. "Excuse me, Mr. Warpool," I said and, with one hand on his elbow and the other on his back, helped him up. "Could I ask you a question? It may be a bit personal." He answered with a glare which I took to mean, "Yeah, go ahead."

I took a sweeping look at him. He gripped the worn, single crutch so tightly his knuckles were white. After forty years the crutch was almost like an extension of himself. His right pants leg was neatly rolled and pinned as if to seal in the freshness of the stump. He lost his leg in Germany in 1944 when he was only eighteen. That was the other thing we had in common—violent amputations. He

had married Mrs. Warpool before he left for the war, so she was pretty much the family martyr for sticking with a crippled man for so long.

"Just what," I began, slipping an arm around his shoulders chummy-like as we walked toward the kitchen, "what would you do if you could have your leg back for a day? No. No. A serious question," I said when he shrugged my arm off and turned toward me, distrust flashing in his eyes. He had always been sensitive about his lack of leg—never tolerated any references to it.

My sincerity must have shown through, though, because he slowly turned his scowling expression toward the kitchen door and allowed himself to fantasize.

"First of all," he began. And I stood as anxious as a child for what I hoped he was going to say. "That woman . . ." His face was fiery red. At that time I felt as if our understanding transcended football and we were on the same wavelength. He needed to say no more. I fetched our coats from the hall closet.

"Hey, where're we going?" he asked, surprised that I'd so blatantly defy Millie and Her Mom.

"I'd like for you to meet some-

one, an associate of mine." I ushered him toward the front door.

"B-but Mrs. Warpool. And canasta." He was having second thoughts.

"Don't worry. Think of it like this: There's four seconds left on the clock. You're down by two and looking at a sixty-yard field goal to win." He scowled at my flippant reference to his missing leg. "And," I paused and smiled mischievously, "Mrs. Warpool is the football."

I raised my hand, palm toward him, and wiggled my fingers. His eyes widened and the corners of his mouth dropped in a look of surprise and confusion.

"Don't worry. You'll see," I assured him. Mrs. Warpool called out that they were ready to play canasta. Mr. Warpool glared vengefully at the kitchen door where she sat just on the other side, dealing from a deck of worn-out cards. Without another word Mr. Warpool put his coat on and left willingly.

I started to close the door but caught a glimpse of myself in the hallway mirror. I stopped and waved sarcastically, my fingers dancing beautifully. I winked at my reflection before pulling the door behind us. Mrs. Warpool was still calling.

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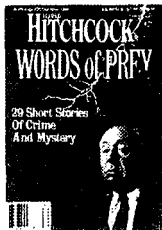


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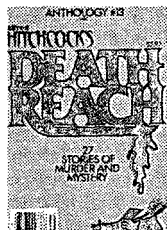
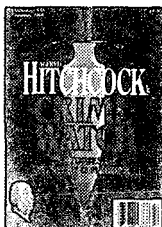
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Ram baugh and the Boys

by Gary Alexander

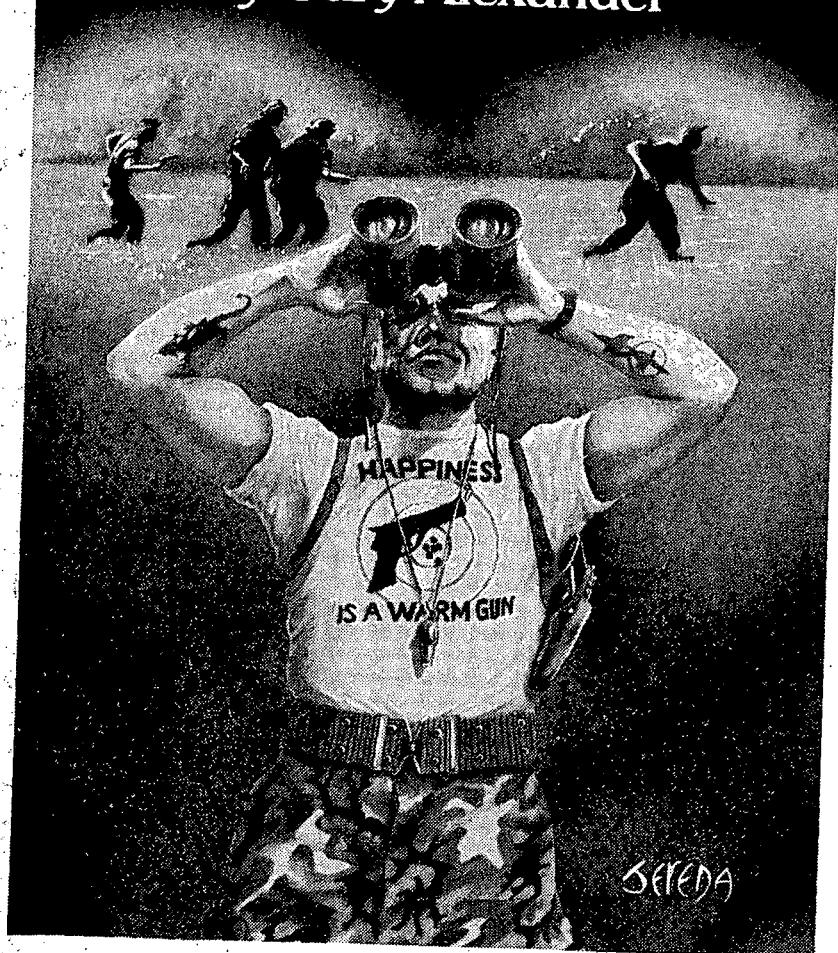


Illustration by Joe Jereda

The afternoon surface of Roth Lake was warm and glassy. Upon it in a rowboat, Frank Rambaugh and his son Richie tested the gullibility of the rainbow trout. But only the mosquitoes were biting.

"Dad, I'm hungry. The general store closes at five. If we don't get—"

"Irrelevant," Rambaugh interrupted, casting his line again. "Siesta time for the fish is over. They shall be ravenous for a barbed steel snack."

Rambaugh, a widower, was senior property claims investigator for Unity Property and Casualty Insurance Company. He worked out of the Seattle office and handled the Western Division's largest and trickiest losses. His desk drawer bulged with suspicious fires and thefts. Woe be it to a Unity policyholder involved in such mischief who drew Rambaugh. More than one was off the books, having neither the means nor the need to pay premiums from a prison cell.

It was Thursday and father and son were near the end of a week's fishing vacation at a rented cabin. Thus far, the trip was not a spectacular success. They had caught a total of eight fish, six of them snagged by Richie. The summer sun had been as cruel to Rambaugh as the trout. He was a large mid-

dle-aged man with a midsection overhang, an easy target for solar rays. An imprudent first day of wearing nothing but Bermuda shorts had rendered the senior investigator a massive and brilliant pink. Now he was peeling. Or, as Richie put it, molting.

"C'mon, Dad," Richie whined. "I'm starving."

Rambaugh's pole dipped violently. "Hah!"

A car horn honked.

"Good Lord, a landlocked whale!"

"Dad, it looks like Mr. Oakes."

David Oakes was Unity's Seattle claims manager. Rambaugh turned abruptly toward shore, inadvertently jerking his pole. The line broke.

"Uh, I guess you want me to row in," Richie said cautiously.

Rambaugh nodded morosely. Oakes met them at the dock and tied their line. He was ten years Rambaugh's junior, a thin, hyperactive, chain-smoking up-and-comer. Rambaugh was convinced that the man was killing himself, overdosing on his own adrenaline, but he had been unable to persuade him to slow down and relax. Oakes had countered that if he paused to smell roses while perched on the corporate ladder, he might well slip off a rung.

"Frank, good to see you even if you are red as a beet. How's

the fishing? I'll bet you're eating trout dinners every night."

"No comment."

"I had a helluva time finding you, Frank. I must've driven two hundred miles today. I thought you said you were going to Ross Lake, not Roth Lake."

"That was no Freudian lisp," Rambaugh said, trudging to the cabin with his tackle.

"Huh?"

"Never mind," Rambaugh said, offering Oakes a seat on the front steps, and sitting heavily himself. "I presume this is important, too important to wait until Monday."

"It sure is, Frank. Have you ever heard of Orville Logan Arms?"

"Arms? Prosthetic devices?"

"Uh-uh. Arms as in guns. Orville Logan Arms is a gun shop."

"Which we no doubt insure."

Oakes lit a cigarette. "Frank, please don't go off on a tangent about Sales and the lousy risks they write. We're expanding our lines and it's a cross we just have to bear."

Richie brought cold cans of beer for the two men and a soda for himself. Rambaugh sipped his and said, "Ah, for the good old days when Mother Unity wrote strictly homeowner and family auto and conventional small business policies. A gun shop. Wonderful. Perhaps we

have some fireworks factories on the books, too."

"Jesus, Frank, I hate this as much as you do."

"Possibly. What happened?"

"Night before last, Orville Logan Arms was burglarized and torched."

"How much?"

"We have one hundred thousand coverage on the building and it was pretty well gutted. Logan is claiming an inventory loss of one hundred and twenty-five thou."

"In the neighborhood of a quarter million," Rambaugh said. "A sizable loss, but why the urgency?"

"Logan is something of a character. He's had brushes with the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms people, and he operates one of those paramilitary survivalist schools where guys run around in the woods shooting blanks at each other. He's had some publicity in the past and this loss made the papers and the TV news. The Home Office honchos want this handled much pronto."

Richie held out a hand. "Lemme have the car keys, Dad. They don't stock much in their freezer case. You want the fried chicken or the Salisbury steak? I think we got their last roast beefs yesterday."

"A touch of sensationalism and everybody has to jump

through hoops," Rambaugh said.

Oakes lit a cigarette from the one he was smoking. "Well, Frank?"

"We'll pack, Richie, and grab burgers on the way home."

David Oakes exhaled smoke and a sigh of relief.

Rambaugh stared out at the lake. A large fish jumped. Was it smiling?

Rambaugh smeared himself with ointments and belated sunscreens, anything in the medicine cabinet that might relieve his itching. Then he dressed: dark suit, matching tie, white shirt, hat. Horn-rimmed glasses and a bulky leather briefcase completed the uniform. This was the style of the insurance man when he entered the field twenty-plus years ago; nothing in the interim had given him cause to dance to the whims of fashion.

He drove to Orville Logan Arms. It was located on the old highway, the main artery that had connected Seattle and points north before the freeways. The four lanes of asphalt had survived the bypass nicely as a ticky-tack ribbon of car dealerships, small motels, service stations, and fast food. The cynical Rambaugh saw it as a savior of local neon and billboard industries.

Orville Logan Arms fit right in. It was a converted two story home that hadn't seen residents since Eisenhower. Tan paint was scorched and bubbled. Window glass was gone, the view within as black as the wrought iron bars over the holes. The front door was open, a four-wheel-drive pickup truck parked next to it.

The man inside with a pen and a clipboard agreed with Rambaugh's image of Orville Logan. He was stocky, around forty, and had a crewcut. He wore bluejeans, a T-shirt emblazoned with a smoking pistol and HAPPINESS IS A WARM GUN, and tattoos on both arms.

Rambaugh presented a business card. "Mr. Logan?"

"Yeah, in the flesh," he said, studying the card. "My insurance company. Okay. It's about time I got some service, the bucks I lay out for premiums with you guys."

Rambaugh resisted mentioning that he rightfully belonged in the fresh air on Roth Lake with his son rather than in this burned-out stench of a building in the company of a cretin. "Do you have any idea who was responsible, sir?"

Logan laughed bitterly. "Yeah. I got a lot of ideas, pal. It was a professional job. They got in fast enough to cut the alarm wires before it went off.

State-of-the-art alarm system, by the way. They were selective. They took the good stuff, left the peashooters, then dumped gasoline here, there, and everywhere, and set it off for good measure. They were after more than my merchandise, Rambaugh. They were looking to put me out of business. Everything they didn't get, they ruined. That little wimp in your office I talked to, whatshisname?"

Rambaugh smiled despite himself. "David Oakes?"

"Yeah, something like that. I gave him a figure on just the weapons that were stolen. With the fire-damaged units, too, we're talking two hundred grand easy."

"You mentioned peashooters. Am I to take you literally?"

Logan smirked. "You don't know much about weapons, do you? By peashooters, I mean small-caliber stuff, .22's, rifles and pistols not worth a hoot for protecting yourself. Go out to the dump and shoot at tin cans is all they're good for. I get a lot of call for small stuff. Guys teaching their sons to shoot and like that, you know. The heavy-duty pieces, they're gone. What's wrong with your face? You don't have leprosy or AIDS or anything, do you?"

Rambaugh looked into Logan's eyes until he averted them.

"Sunburn peeling. I presume you can substantiate your loss."

"My records were in the strongbox. It got so hot it fried 'em to a crisp. I'm working on that now. Here."

Logan handed Rambaugh his clipboard. He scanned a long list of heavy caliber rifles, pistols, machine guns, mortars, and bazookas. "Good Lord! Were you preparing for war? Aren't some of these items illegal?"

"The mortars and bazookas aren't operable and you'd have to modify the machine guns to fire full automatic. I'm clean with ATF."

"ATF?"

"Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. A bunch of federal clerks who act like I'm public enemy number one. The way they've hassled me, you'd think they'd concentrate on those terrorists, instead of a loyal American," Logan said, shaking his head.

"Who would want to buy that sort of firepower?"

"Collectors. Average Joes. You hang a .55 caliber anti-tank rifle on the wall of your rec room, you'd get a lot more comments than you would with a moose head, wouldn't you?"

"So what's the motive for stealing your inventory?"

"The bucks. They could turn it over in a minute. Somebody wants me out of business, too."

Don't ask me who. I haven't got the foggiest."

Rambaugh said, "I understand you also own a survivalist school."

"The media's blown that all out of proportion," Logan said, waving a beefy paw. "They make it sound like I'm training an army. I'm not. I'm just fulfilling a need."

"A need?" Rambaugh wondered out loud.

"Look what's going on in this country and around the world, Rambaugh. The junkies and thieves are taking over, and with the commies on our doorstep in Cuba and Nicaragua, anything could happen. These boys I'm training, they're God-fearing Americans who're sick and tired of the direction our country is headed. They came to me to learn how to protect their families and themselves and, by God, I'm giving them their money's worth."

"I was under the impression that the military and the police were protecting us from communism and crime, respectively," Rambaugh said evenly.

"If that's what you think, pal, you're living in an ivory tower. When things come crashing down around you, don't come crying to me."

Logan's galloping paranoia was giving Rambaugh a headache and the itching on his back

was getting worse. He wanted desperately to scratch. "I imagine you have an extensive military background."

Orville Logan hesitated. His face reddened. "The greatest disappointment in my life was flunking my army physical. I had flat feet. I'd've loved to have went to 'Nam and wasted some VC."

Rambaugh, who *had* served in Vietnam, disliked the use of the diminutive "'Nam" by a non-veteran, especially a blow-hard like Logan. There was something proprietary about the term. "Do not feel deprived. It was not an altogether pleasant experience."

Logan gave Rambaugh the once-over. "You were there? What did you do, pound a typewriter?"

"Indeed."

"That figures."

"I also lived in a hotel in downtown Saigon. One day when I was coming down the stairs to go to dinner, two sappers carrying satchel charges rushed the MP's. This was in 1964, early in the war, before it became full-scale. Security was casual and too often careless. The guerrillas killed the MP's. I hit the floor and was fortunate enough to have one MP's pistol within reach. I killed both guerrillas before they could ignite their charges."

There was a long, silent pause. Logan finally said, "Yeah, well, good for you. Nice work."

Rambaugh did not reply. He was trembling, immensely angry at himself for allowing Logan to coax from him the most horrifying ninety seconds of his life.

"You ought to come out to my school this weekend," Logan said. "I could maybe use you as a guest instructor."

"No, thank you."

Rambaugh's coldness was obvious. "Okay, fine. So when am I gonna get paid? I got a business to reestablish, you know."

"When you document your loss and my investigation is complete," Rambaugh said, turning away. "Have a nice day, Mr. Logan."

Rambaugh went to the Federal Building in downtown Seattle. At the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, he was referred to Bob Crow, the agent most familiar with Orville Logan.

"He's a piece of work, isn't he?" Crow said.

"Is he as dangerous as he would like one to believe?" Rambaugh asked.

"His type of mentality is dangerous," Crow said. "Grown men living out their fantasies by playing with guns worry the hell out of me."

"I can understand why. But are Mr. Logan and his merry band acting out these fantasies within the letter of the laws you enforce?"

"They are and, believe me, I make a special point of looking over his shoulder. Everything that has to be registered is, appropriate taxes paid," Crow said, sliding a thick folder across his desk. "I'd put a lid on him in a minute if I could."

Rambaugh perused it. "Proof of possession, unfortunately, of many of the items he mentioned to me earlier."

"I don't blame you for resisting payment, Mr. Rambaugh, but unless you can prove otherwise, these goodies were probably in his shop."

"He states that the motive was more than financial."

"Could be," Crow said. "This is a subculture that attracts cuckoos. It wouldn't surprise me if he had enemies."

"Your opinion, please. Did Mr. Logan create the loss to cover business reverses?"

"That's more your department than mine," Crow said. "I guess you'd have to run a profit and loss on him to know for sure, but whenever I was out there, he had customers. It was a busy place and he seemed prosperous."

"His survivalist school?"

"It would never make the Special Forces or Marine Corps

turn green with envy. He's leased fifty acres in the boon-docks and mostly has his students playing hide and seek."

"Mr. Crow, the fire and burglary stand to cost my company in excess of three hundred thousand dollars. What do your instincts tell you?"

Bob Crow smiled. "Don't let the ol' boy superpatriot image fool you. Orville Logan is one sharp cookie. Before you pay a dime, make sure all the t's are crossed and the i's dotted."

Lunch time. Before Rambaugh ate, he called in. There was an urgent message from David Oakes.

"Frank, what's going on?"

"Beg pardon."

"Orville Logan just phoned. He said you're being hard-nosed, that you're refusing to pay. He's threatening to go to the insurance commissioner. He says he doesn't care if you're a war hero or not. What's he mean by that, Frank?"

Oakes didn't know. Rambaugh told his war story only under duress or the influence of alcohol. He had blurted the event no more than four or five times, including earlier today. Richie didn't even know. "Never mind. I merely refused immediate payment."

"You didn't call him a crook, did you, Frank? I hate it when you do that. Logan says you left

him with that impression."

"No, I didn't, David, but I did not tell him that he was not a crook either."

"Jesus, Frank, what's that mean?"

"Have a nice day, David."

Rambaugh hung up and ordered lunch: double cheeseburger, french fries, and cole slaw. He looked at the Yuppie diners seated around him and wondered again how one could refuel for an afternoon of corporate throat-cutting on pasta salad or a grilled chicken breast. When he finished, he ordered a hot fudge sundae for dessert and turned through the morning paper.

In the sports section was an article about a fisherman who had landed a record-size rainbow trout at Roth Lake yesterday evening. He was a Tacoma pipefitter who planned to have the fish stuffed and mounted. He must have been hungry, must have been feeding, said the happy angler. There was already a hook in his mouth.

Rambaugh's appetite was ruined by the injustice. He left the uneaten sundae and visited an old friend, Jack Harper of the fire marshal's office. They had worked together for more years than either man would care to remember. In Rambaugh's view, Harper was the best arson man in town, a true scientist.

"The Logan fire is yours,

Frank? You sure get the dandies."

"Indeed. It has the earmarks of an obvious arson."

"No question. Analysis on char samples isn't in yet, but I'd wager a month's pay it's gasoline. Six or seven hot spots, with trailers where the gas was dripped. They probably used ten gallons."

"What can you tell me about the alarm system, Jack?"

"Fairly new and first-rate. It's sound *and* motion activated. You turn the key and you've got thirty seconds to get inside and shut it off before it howls. They used a crowbar on the front door, went right to the box, and snipped the wires."

"Could somebody have used a key and applied ersatz jimmy marks?"

"That's my suspicion, Frank. It's a steel door with two deadbolts. No kid with a stolen credit card could slip the bolts."

"In the parlance, an inside job?"

"Prove it and I wouldn't faint from shock," Harper said. "How's Logan doing financially?"

"Preliminary indications are that the business was thriving."

"That makes it tough. A bankruptcy filing would sure be helpful. I can give you a report on the physical evidence

and it looks like at this point Denmark's rotten from border to border, but you'll have to fill in some missing puzzle parts before we have a case. What's your next step?"

Rambaugh thought for a moment and said, "To go into the hinterland this weekend and observe war games."

Jack Harper chuckled and said, "Frank, did anyone ever tell you that you talk funny?"

Ovrille Logan's survivalist school was in a timbered, sparsely-populated corner of the county. Mount Rainier loomed like the world's largest mound of ice cream, thought Rambaugh, whose metaphors often featured food. He spotted the cutoff from the mountain highway on the third try, bounded along two miles of gravel and potholes, and came to a dead-end clearing.

He knew it was naive, but he had pictured a command post, a headquarters building. In the army they were either white or brick, Old Glory waving atop a flagpole, the grounds manicured by troops who had little else to do.

Logan's apparent nerve center was a cluster of parked cars and pickup trucks, from which crude, trampled trails emanated. Rambaugh got out and

heard distant shouts and the sporadic pop of gunfire.

He picked the trail most likely to lead him to the action and entered hesitantly. It was narrow, dark, and musty. Ferns slapped against his slacks and he had to duck under tree limbs. Aside from his annual fishing expedition, Rambaugh was no outdoorsman. He tried not to think about snakes, bears, and poison ivy.

He emerged at another clearing. This one was larger, five acres, at least. In the center was a wood-frame tower approximately thirty feet high. Orville Logan stood on top of it, whistle in his mouth, binoculars held to his eyes. He was wearing fatigue pants and a T-shirt with Colonel Qaddafi's likeness set in crosshairs.

Logan was yelling instructions toward the far edge of the clearing. Rambaugh saw men in jungle fatigues, carrying rifles, darting in and out of the undergrowth. They were young, in their twenties and thirties, too youthful for Vietnam service.

Richie had begged to come along. A high school senior, the lad was an ardent Chuck Norris and Rambo fan. Rambaugh was appalled by his infatuation with Hollywood superhero violence and had refused.

He would have been disap-

pointed anyway, Rambaugh decided. Logan's students did not appear to be crusader material. They seemed to fall into two categories. The first, presumably the owners of the pickup trucks, were fat and/or bearded, heavily perspiring last night's tavern beer as they stumbled about. The second type was smaller and softer. They struck Rambaugh as bookkeepers without constructive hobbies or girlfriends.

Logan spotted Rambaugh and climbed down his tower. "So you changed your mind? You gonna give my boys a little pep talk on killing gooks?"

Rambaugh winced at the racial slur. "No."

"Then you brought me a check? Your boss, when I called him and read him the riot act, he said you could probably cut me a partial payment check."

When cornered on the telephone, David Oakes was inclined to make vague promises. "No."

"Then what the hell you doing here? We got too much training to get in today for you to be wasting my time."

Rambaugh was looking at the tower. He noticed a rope with a sliding ring and a handle attached to the uppermost framework. It drooped over a sand pit and was tied to a tree beyond. "What is the purpose

of that rope?" he asked.

"Jump simulation. You slide down and drop. If you got the guts, that is."

"Jump? As in parachuting?"

"You got it, pal. I'm negotiating with a sky-diving outfit so my advanced students can try the real thing."

"To what purpose, please?"

"If it's any of your damn business, Rambaugh, my boys are paying good money for the course and I intend to ready them for anything. Answer my question, will you?"

Rambaugh was puzzled by the contradiction of men protecting their homes and families from communists and dope fiends by jumping out of airplanes. "Curiosity."

"You know what that did to the cat."

Rambaugh ignored the threat. "More specifically, I am curious if any of your students might be responsible for the loss."

"Forget it. These aren't common criminals, you know."

"Probably not, but would you mind if I interviewed them?"

"Hell yes, I'd mind," Logan said, jabbing a finger. "You're getting to be a real pain, Rambaugh. You think everybody who buys one of your policies is a crook. You get the hell off my property and do your job the way it oughta be done. Go cut me that check."

"I will be in touch."

"You better not take all year," Logan said menacingly. "You got a tiger by the tail. Play any more games with me and when the smoke clears, you'll be lucky if you still got a job."

Rambaugh paused at the parking area, wrote down descriptions and license numbers of every vehicle, and drove to the nearest town. He bought sandwiches, coffee, and a paperback mystery novel, and returned to the cutoff. He parked on the opposite shoulder, one hundred yards away. And waited.

Four hours later the food and coffee were long gone. Rambaugh had deduced halfway through the novel that the victim's sister-in-law and her microbiologist lover had poisoned him. The pages turned slowly thereafter. Time flagged.

Orville Logan's students began to leave. The pickup trucks departed earliest, one at a time. Then came most of the cars, also singly. Logan drove out and Rambaugh ducked. Ten minutes passed and the last three cars emerged together—an Audi, a Citation, and a Corvette.

Rambaugh followed. He was counting on a grouping, he was thinking conspiracy. They took him into Seattle, to a restaurant in the south end. The trio

was in civilian clothing now, exuberant after a day of simulated killing.

He waited outside while they settled in for dinner or drinks. He guessed they would opt for the latter and went directly to the cocktail lounge, walking stiffly from an afternoon of being doubled up in a subcompact company car. Thanks to incessant scratching, his back and arms burned. Conspicuousness was the covert investigator's worst enemy and he hoped that his peculiar and semicrippled gait wouldn't attract their attention.

He need not have worried. His objectives occupied a dark corner table, gushing with camaraderie. Gesturing and laughing, presumably recap-ping their fun, they wouldn't have clocked Rambaugh if he had had two heads.

He couldn't overhear anything, but could imagine the general content. The blue-collar boys with the pickups were grim and businesslike, asking only for the opportunity to apply their skills to a home burglar. These three were hungering for and savoring *adventure*.

Rambaugh nursed manhattans while they guzzled pitchers of beer. The boys calmed down as their beer consumption increased. Their conversation

became serious and hushed. They paid their tab after the fifth pitcher and marched out past Rambaugh without a glance. The senior investigator was too weary to continue the surveillance. He had one for the road, on his expense account. Mother Unity's accountants would understand. Or else.

Monday morning, the scheduled end of Rambaugh's vacation. He called a contact at the Department of Motor Vehicles and ran the license numbers of the Audi, Citation, and Corvette. He then called a friend at a credit bureau and gave her the names and addresses of the registered owners. Within an hour, she had the financial history of the three boys.

Alan McGinnis, the Citation, was twenty-eight years old, divorced, one child. He was a journeyman printer who earned twenty-six thousand per year. He was in arrears on child support payments and his credit cards were charged to their limits.

Martin Price, the Audi, was single, age twenty-seven. He managed Northstar Self Storage, a public storage facility. His salary was nineteen thousand and he had no outstanding debts.

Darwin Meade, age thirty-

three, owed four thousand dollars on a 1981 Chevrolet Corvette. He was unmarried and worked at a travel agency. His income was variable, part salary, part commission. Last year he declared twenty-eight thousand dollars. He owed an additional two thousand dollars on miscellaneous consumer debts.

Fairly average guys, Rambaugh thought, conventional and statistically anonymous as can be. He phoned Jack Harper and Bob Crow for progress reports. Both said that they had queried their usual sources, informants with long antennae. Negative on the Logan fire and theft. Harper said he hadn't been able to link it with arson pros he knew of. Per Crow, the weapons hadn't shown on the marketplace at any level, underworld or legitimate.

This was discouraging *and* encouraging. Rambaugh was encouraged by the possibility that the criminals were amateurs, out of the mainstream of arson and illegal gun dealing. The possibility, therefore, was increased that Logan and his boys were in collusion, mentor and students conspiring for an unknown purpose.

The benefit to Logan was obvious. But what did the boys stand to gain? Of the three, only Alan McGinnis had financial

woes, and his problems were far from desperate. It didn't logically follow that any of them would risk prison for a small percentage of the proceeds.

Rambaugh checked the time. Ten thirty. David Oakes was at a meeting and due in at eleven. David would demand a status report and Rambaugh's fixation on policyholder dishonesty promised a session of hand-wringing, of pleading that he cease playing detective and adjust the loss. He loaded his briefcase and fled.

If McGinnis was the most financially vulnerable, Darwin Meade could be the psychological weak link. Rambo-style fantasy was inherent to the weekend's frolicking and Meade drove a Corvette, a flashy plastic sports model favored by the post-adolescent swinger. Meade was shoring up his image and his sense of worth with sandbags.

And besides, his travel agency was in a downtown office building, within convenient walking distance. The agency was large, occupying an entire wing of a lower level arcade. Between the receptionists and a bank of private offices were rows of cubicles. Rambaugh asked for Mr. Meade and was directed to a cubicle near the center. Evidently he was a mere cog.

Darwin Meade rose to greet

Rambaugh. He was impeccably dressed in three-piece gray pin-stripes, a short, trim man with a receding hairline. A bulky class ring accentuated soft, almost feminine hands.

"Darwin Meade. How can we serve you?"

Rambaugh did not return the introduction. He said, "If I cared to travel, where could you send me to savor action and adventure? Places that allow a man to be a man."

"Well, we primarily cater to the business traveler, but I suppose just about anywhere."

Meade was visibly uncomfortable with Rambaugh and his vagaries. He was probably accustomed to dispatching attorneys to New York and Los Angeles. "Unconventional locales replete with danger and intrigue," Rambaugh said.

"Well, if you could be more specific, sir."

"Nicaragua. Afghanistan. Chad," Rambaugh went on, enjoying himself. A plan was formulating as he spoke.

"Those, well, the nations you mention, travel is highly restricted—"

"But not impossible with the proper planning?"

"Well—"

"I shall require weapons, of course. And a pipeline to indigenuous anti-communist freedom fighters."

Meade stared at him, the little color in his face draining.

"Please do not deny that you have access to what I request."

Meade leaned forward and whispered, "Who sent you to me?"

"Classified information."

"I can't help you. I don't know what you're talking about."

Rambaugh stood. "I will be back tomorrow. Think it over and make the right choice."

Rambaugh, a mystery man, marched out. From the arcade, he could see Meade dialing his phone, talking frantically, before he hurried from his cubicle. Rambaugh took his time reaching the stairs, giving his pursuer a fair opportunity.

He walked to his building and took the elevator to the parking garage. A slight hitch. How could Meade follow him on foot? Rambaugh solved it by driving to the upper parking level and spending a leisurely fifteen minutes filling up with gas.

At the end of the block, in a loading zone, was Darwin Meade and his red Corvette. Excellent. Rambaugh headed north. Meade maintained a steady two-car-length interval, perhaps a technique taught by Logan.

The old highway was a clogged nightmare of unsynchronized traffic lights. Rambaugh was careful not to speed

through when they turned yellow. If the travel agent chanced a red light and was blasted by a crossing vehicle, the fun would be over.

Rambaugh slowed at Orville Logan Arms. He turned at the street beyond it, circled the block, and stopped, the gun shop in view. He simply sat for five minutes, staring, as if a feral animal marking territory.

He didn't see the Corvette until he started south on the old highway. Meade had again somehow managed to maneuver two car lengths behind. Rambaugh's plan was developing hard edges. The next step was to reverse the order of surveillance.

A hamburger joint Rambaugh knew was half a mile ahead, its signs partially obscured by a sprawling discount furniture store. He timed the last traffic light perfectly, accelerating under it as it flicked to red. He swung into the restaurant at faster than prudent speed, hesitated at the rear, at the menu board speaker.

"May I take your order?"

"A moment to decide, please."

Rambaugh lingered more than a moment. A hungry lunch clientele was forming, horns honking. He reluctantly drove through. A double cheeseburger, jumbo fries, onion rings, apple turnover, and tall Coke

would have hit the spot.

He edged into oncoming traffic, leaned forward, and squinted southward, eliciting yet another series of angry horn honks. Meade's Corvette was there, the second block down, burning rubber as it lurched from the curb lane. He had lost Rambaugh and the desired state of panic was setting in.

Rambaugh took chase. His company car, a four-cylinder Ford Tempo, could not sprint with Meade's V-8, fuel-injected hot rod.

Meade was a speck at the fourth light, but he had turned toward a freeway entrance. Rambaugh knew shortcuts and gained ground. On the interstate, however, factory performance limits came into play. He urged the Tempo to seventy-five, ignored a shimmy, various abnormal noises, and barely kept the red sports car in sight.

Meade exited ten miles south of town. Rambaugh, too. The Corvette had vanished. Disappeared. He was temporarily depressed, but a branch of the hamburger chain he had inconvenienced was at the foot of the ramp. Rambaugh ate inside, devouring what he had coveted earlier. He worked as he lunched, reviewing his notes.

Martin Price, manager of Northstar Self Storage. The facility was five minutes from

here, adjacent to a bus park-and-ride lot. Upon this discovery, Rambaugh was too excited to finish his meal, but had the presence of mind to take the apple turnover along in its handy Styrofoam container.

The park-and-ride was packed with the cars of commuters. Rambaugh slipped his into a free space and observed. Among the vehicles at Northstar Self Storage were Price's Audi and Meade's Corvette. Alan McGinnis and his Citation joined them minutes later.

Rambaugh made phone calls from a kiosk adjacent to the bus line. The people he talked to said to stand by, to wait for them, not to let the subjects out of his sight. Rambaugh said he would, but his fingers were crossed; he doubted if anything interesting would occur in daylight. He went to the closest convenience store for provisions: two burritos, a coffee, and—no, not a mystery novel, not after a perusal of the magazine rack—a magazine that catered to would-be mercenary soldiers.

He returned to the park-and-ride, and began on the coffee and the magazine. He had never read one before and was fascinated by the weapons advertisements and the articles glorifying warfare. Killing and paranoia were the dominant

themes. The editorial target seemed to be disturbed veterans and other males insecure about their manhood.

Rambaugh had a sudden hunch and turned to the classified section. In a box, flanked by offers of daggers and Ninja uniforms, in large bold type was: ENEMIES OF FREEDOM BEWARE. MERCS AVAILABLE. FULLY EQUIPPED FOR LIGHT INFANTRY. NO HOT SPOT TOO HOT!!! A Seattle post office box number was given for replies.

He *wondered*. Logan and his boys? The customized layout a product of Alan McGinnis, the printer? Rambaugh waited, nervous energy and anxiety weighting the hands of his watch.

Night finally came. It had surely taken a week to arrive. Most of the commuter cars in the lot were gone and he felt conspicuous. He saw McGinnis, Price, and Meade leave the office and open the overhead door of a storage bay. He focused on them with binoculars, but it was too dark inside the bay to distinguish anything except a darting flashlight beam.

In twenty minutes they emerged. The boys were having a conference, an agitated powwow of shaking heads and hand gestures. Northstar Self Storage had rental trucks

available to movers. Price brought one over and backed it to the doorway.

Orville Logan appeared in his four wheeler. Another conference ensued. Rambaugh wished he had a shotgun mike. The boys were shouting at Logan, pointing fingers. Their mentor's body English was conciliatory.

Rambaugh's instinct was to move in. But where were the reinforcements he had alerted? Shooting it out with a pair of Vietcong a quarter of a century ago to save his own life was one thing, but taking on four men and enough ordnance to invade Idaho was quite another.

He started his engine, a perspiring and indecisive hand on the gearshift lever. Three cars raced through Northstar's gate, tires squealing. If this was not the cavalry in the final act of a John Ford western, it was a heartwarming facsimile.

Rambaugh joined them.

"Small world, Frank," said Jack Harper. "You're limping."

"Living in my car doesn't agree with me. You materialized from nowhere."

"That apartment complex across the street was good cover," the fire marshal said. "We saw you. We figured that three more cheap sedans in there would raise suspicions, even from these dodoes."

Bob Crow of ATF had been in

the second car. He was overseeing two men as they spread-eagled the suspects against a wall, frisked them, and read them their rights.

"Seattle Police Department detectives, Mr. Rambaugh," Crow said. "We told them about the party you arranged."

The detective cuffing Orville Logan said, "Wouldn't've missed it."

"I don't say zilch till I see my attorney," Logan said.

Darwin Meade glanced at Rambaugh. "You!"

Rambaugh tipped his hat. "Small world."

"Frank," Harper said, "I've just taken a peek, but it looks like the cupboard is kind of bare."

They walked into the bay. Harper turned on the lights. Weapons were stacked neatly in boxes and on shelves. Gun oil assaulted Rambaugh's nostrils. He compared the contents to Logan's list of stolen property.

"Less than half the claimed loss is here," he said.

"That's par for the course, isn't it?" Harper asked.

"The boys were quarreling and I do not think exaggeration of an insurance claim was the issue."

McGinnis and Price were in the back of one detective car, Meade and Logan in the other. Rambaugh said to Meade, "It must shake your faith in hu-

manity. If you cannot trust your commanding officer, who can you trust?"

"Keep your damn mouth shut," Logan said.

Rambaugh tore the classified ad from the magazine. "Yours?"

Meade nodded. "Al wrote it. I hate my dull life. I just wanted to contribute. Al and Marty, too. Can you understand that?"

"With Logan's cooperation, you and your pals broke into Orville Logan Arms, stole the weapons, and set the fire. He was going to lead you into glorious combat, parachuting into Central America or some such."

"Yes," Meade said softly.

The detective at the wheel said eagerly, "Will you give me a statement, Meade?"

"No!" Logan screamed.

"My visit to your travel agency created uncertainty. People who should not know did. You had not examined the storage bay since you stashed the goodies here the night of the burglary. You found a substantial share of it missing."

Meade nodded and looked at Logan. "Don't give me any of that name, rank, and serial number crap, Orville. You used us. You promised that we'd do something important with the weapons and the insurance money. Instead, you were selling the weapons piecemeal."

"My lawyers are gonna sue you all for false arrest," Logan said.

"A statement?" the detective asked again.

"If you get me out of this car," Meade said, looking at Logan. "Away from the bad smell."

Meade was transferred to Bob Crow's. Crow followed the SPD detectives downtown. Rambaugh and Harper stood guard until police and ATF officers came for the contraband.

"I guess this is a new one for you, Frank. Guns, I mean."

"In a more unique way, yes."

"How do you mean?"

"The motive. Misguided idealism. Usually people steal from Mother Unity solely for the money."

FICTION

Quiet Night in Turkeyville

by Carlos L'Dera



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Sergeant Murphy leaned back in his chair behind the six foot high desk in Turkeyville's West Side Station. He would very shortly complete his first tour of duty in his new job. A tall man, six feet four inches, well built and muscular with brown hair beginning to recede, he looked every bit the part of a tough cop. In truth, however, he was something of an intellectual.

He prided himself on never losing his temper and on being able to handle situations, in which other officers would use firearms, with words and reason. He was also fiercely proud of his integrity. These two elements were what got him in trouble and were the cause of his being transferred from his exciting and highly interesting post at Headquarters to the dull station of the west side.

It was bad enough that the chief's daughter had fallen in love with him (she was sixteen), it was worse that the chief felt (quite correctly) that Murphy believed himself smarter than he, but Murphy's dedication to duty and insistence on being fair to all were just too much.

The chief had long ago decided to get rid of Murphy, get him out of Headquarters to some post where he could do no harm, as soon as possible. His chance came when Murphy gave

the mayor a speeding ticket. The mayor thought he could pull rank to avoid the ticket...not with Sergeant Murphy!

So here he was on the west side, reflecting upon the lack of events during his first tour of duty in a station where nothing ever happened.

He glanced around at the other people in the station house. Patrolman Gleeson was standing by the fingerprint table talking to Patrolman Knotts, the Policeman's Benevolent Association Shop Steward, and Harry Krell, the attorney for the PBA. The union contract had just been ratified, and the three of them were discussing its impact.

"Help!" a woman shouted. "Help! Save me!"

The scream brought Murphy out of his daydreams. To his amazement, struggling through the door of the station house, was a woman in her sixties, about five feet tall and weighing not more than a hundred pounds. She was holding onto her purse for dear life. She had to, for also struggling through the door, and also holding onto the purse, was a youth of about eighteen, about six feet tall and lanky, also weighing about a hundred pounds.

The two got halfway between the door and the desk when the

youth tripped the old lady and the two of them fell to the floor, the young man pummeling the old lady while attempting to wrestle the purse away from her.

I don't believe it, thought Murphy. A mugging in the middle of the city's quietest station!

"Help!" screamed the woman. "He's killing me!"

Sergeant Murphy snapped out of his shock. Back in control, he glanced at the others in the room. They continued with their conversation.

They must be in shock, too, thought Murphy. He calmly took control of the situation.

"Patrolman Gleeson, please subdue this man," instructed Murphy.

"I'm on break, sarge," came the reply.

Murphy stared at the patrolman in disbelief. Naw, he thought, he didn't say that. He couldn't have said that. It's just the surprise of this incident at the end of an extremely dull and boring day. The reason the patrolman wasn't moving was that he too was in shock and just had to snap out of it. Murphy tried again.

"Patrolman Gleeson, I don't think you understood me. There is a mugging taking place in the center of the room. Do you see it?"

"Yeah, I see it, sarge," came the reply.

"Well, in that case, would you mind assisting the woman and subdue the assailant?"

"I'm on break, sarge."

"Patrolman, please cut your break short and assist that woman. You may complete your break after the assailant is subdued."

At this point, Patrolman Knotts spoke up.

"Excuse me, sergeant, but the union contract is very specific about breaks. Every patrolman is entitled to one fifteen minute break during the first four hours and the last four hours of his tour. Patrolman Gleeson is on his break and therefore not subject to duty until said break is completed. That will be in nine minutes and forty-five seconds."

"Are you trying to tell me," the sergeant said, astounded, "that you intend to let this mugging continue for another ten minutes just because of contract language?"

"It's actually nine minutes now, sergeant. Although if we were to be technical about it, the time this conversation is taking is occurring on Patrolman Gleeson's break and therefore the break should be extended. But I think we can let this one slide."

"Thank you for your consideration, Patrolman Knotts." The sergeant's voice showed a faint sign of irritation. "Now could

you tell me if you are also on break?"

"No, I'm not, sergeant."

"Fine. Then would you mind assisting this woman?"

"I'm sorry, sergeant, but as an elected official of the PBA, my functions are limited to the representation of the patrolmen on this force. Therefore, routine police work, such as you are requesting me to perform, is outside the scope of my job description."

The sergeant gritted his teeth. In his twelve years on the police force, he had never lost his composure. He would not start now. There had to be a way to reach these people.

"Patrolman Knotts, are you saying that you will not assist this lady?"

"I am unable to, sergeant. That would be in violation of the union contract. But don't worry, Patrolman Gleeson's break will be over in just a few minutes."

Murphy gripped the edge of his desk. Steady, he told himself. Just stay calm.

"In that case, Patrolman Knotts, I will take care of this situation," Murphy said as he rose from behind the desk and moved toward the struggling pair.

"I'm sorry, sergeant, but you can't do that."

The sergeant stopped in mid-stride. He stared at Patrolman

Knotts not in anger so much as astonishment.

"And why in the name of the great blue holy heavens with all their stars and stripes forever can't I?"

"You, as a sergeant, are part of management. Therefore you cannot intervene or in any way perform the duties of a patrolman. That would be taking work away from the patrolmen and jeopardizing their jobs. Your job is strictly that of supervision."

If he says the word "therefore" one more time, thought Murphy, I'm just liable to become unhappy. Calmly, although tensely, he tried reason once more.

"Patrolman Knotts, it would appear to me that the immediate problem is to ensure the safety of this woman who is currently being beaten to death in the middle of the floor of the West Side Police Station. Now, I'm willing to concede to you the points you have made with regard to Patrolman Gleeson's break and your job functions, but don't you think we could bend the rules just a teeny bit so that I could correct this situation before we have a murder on our hands? Don't you think that's a good idea? Hmmmmmm?"

"I'm sorry, sergeant," Patrolman Knotts said stubbornly, his chin beginning to protrude,

"but the contract is very specific on that point. Management may not in any way perform an act which puts the job of a patrolman in jeopardy."

While Murphy fought to maintain his composure, Harry Krell joined the discussion.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but there is a section in the union contract that deals with just this type of situation and might solve the problem for all concerned."

At last! thought Murphy. A voice of reason!

"What is it, Mr. Krell?" asked Murphy anxiously.

"Well, sergeant, Section 4, Paragraph 12, Subparagraph A-4, states that, in an emergency situation—emergency situation being defined as one in which there is imminent danger to life or physical well being—a member of management may perform the duties of a patrolman provided the following two criteria are met: (1) there are no patrolmen readily available to perform the necessary function or functions, and (2) the management representative involved notifies his superior of the situation and receives written consent from the superior for intervention."

"Are you telling me," asked the reddening face of Sergeant Murphy, "that I have to obtain written permission from Lieu-

tenant Harold before I can do anything to save this woman's life?"

"Well, that might be a little bit melodramatic, sergeant. As you can see, she's struggling very nicely and holding her own, so she's very much alive. But written authorization is required if you want to become involved."

Murphy's voice was strangely taut. "Please advise Lieutenant Harold that I would like to see him at the front desk."

"Who are you addressing, sergeant? Patrolman Gleeson is on break, that function is not in Patrolman Knotts' job description, and as the attorney for the PBA, I certainly . . ."

"I'll call him myself," said Murphy tersely. "That is, if there is nothing in the union contract to prevent it, of course."

"Actually, it is a minor violation, but we can be flexible in an emergency situation."

"Thank you, Mr. Krell," said the sergeant as he returned to the desk and called the lieutenant.

Lieutenant Harold arrived on the scene in seconds. A jovial man of five feet eight inches, with a huge pot belly and a reindeer-red nose, he was overjoyed by the call. "Something is happening at the West Side Station?" he asked excitedly. "I've waited twenty years for this."

Sergeant Murphy quickly explained the situation, his recommended course of action, and the action necessary from Lieutenant Harold.

"I don't know, Murphy," replied the lieutenant, "this is a kind of tricky situation. I mean, after all, we do have a union contract and although there is that stipulation about management intervention . . . you see, sergeant, I'm getting ready to retire in about two months and, you know, if you mess around with the union, it could get kind of sticky, you know? And with only two months to go until retirement, I'm not at all sure . . ."

"Begging the lieutenant's pardon," Murphy's voice was growing louder, "but I'm not at all sure this woman can wait two months!"

"I'm not at all sure about that, sergeant. Did you see the right cross she just gave that guy? Larry Holmes would have had trouble with that one."

"Sir, would you please humor me and grant me this one little request in honor of my first day at your magnificent station?"

"You know, sergeant, that might just be the trouble. You're from Headquarters and not used to the way we do things here at West Side. Perhaps if you'd take the time to learn our ways . . ."

"WILL YOU GIVE ME PERMISSION TO INTERVENE?!!!"

The sergeant's somewhat louder than normal voice shocked the lieutenant.

"If it means that much to you, sergeant, go ahead. But there's no need to shout. We're all civilized here. Is that the way they do things down at Headquarters?"

Murphy ignored the question and advanced upon the dueling duo.

"Just a minute, sergeant," said Harry Krell. "You have only verbal authorization. You must have written authorization."

"LIEUTENANT! PLEASE WRITE OUT THE + # \$ % & * AUTHORIZATION FOR THE + # \$ % & * ATTORNEY WHILE I SETTLE THIS + # \$ % & * PROBLEM!!"

"It's such a shame," said the lieutenant to Harry Krell as he wrote out the authorization. "Not only is the pressure at Headquarters so great that people working there have trouble being calm, but apparently it makes them deaf. Listen to how he's shouting." Harry Krell nodded in sympathy.

Murphy moved to the center of the station house, grabbed the youth from behind in a full nelson, pulled him off the woman, and advised him that he was under arrest.

"Hold it, sergeant," said the smiling voice of Harry Krell. "This is highly irregular."

"This . . . is . . . highly . . . what?"

"First of all, this woman has not filed an official complaint with the police department about this incident. Therefore, no crime has been committed. Secondly, you failed to advise this man of his constitutional rights before you began to manhandle him. Therefore, you have violated his constitutional rights. This is a very serious matter, sergeant."

Just my luck, thought Murphy. Someone else knows the word "therefore."

"If you need any legal assistance, son, just call me," Harry told the youth as Murphy released him. "I think you have a very good case against both the sergeant and the city, and I'm willing to represent you on a contingency basis."

The youth muttered something about police brutality and resumed trying to wrest the purse from the woman.

Sergeant Murphy stared in disbelief. This, he thought, is going to be a very bad day.

Fortunately for the sergeant, help was on the way. It was now four P.M., and the afternoon shift was coming on duty. Murphy's inner voice was praying fervently that Sergeant Dono-

van, Murphy's relief, had some degree of sanity. Sergeant Donovan listened attentively as Murphy explained the situation, then sadly shook his head.

"I'm really sorry, Murphy. I'd like to help you out on this one, this being your first day and all, but I really have my hands tied."

"You what!"

"The procedures are quite clear on this matter, Murphy. Departmental policy specifies that a relieving Watch Commander cannot take charge of a shift until all matters occurring on the previous shift are brought to a conclusion. Nor may said relieving Watch Commander offer any assistance to the Watch Commander being relieved unless said Watch Commander being relieved requests such assistance in writing through the official chain of command and receives appropriate approval."

"Am I to understand, Sergeant Donovan, that you will not assist me or this woman unless I get a note signed by this clone of a nerd, who probably got his lieutenant's bars with S&H Green Stamps, that it is permissible to save this woman's life and that assault with intent to do bodily harm is a no-no?"

"Sergeant, you are totally out of line!" interjected the lieutenant.

ant. "Sergeant Donovan is absolutely correct in his position. Furthermore, you are being extremely insubordinate. I am your superior officer, and you are not only showing lack of respect but also a complete disregard for official policy. There is absolutely no reason why Sergeant Donovan should intervene to clean up your mess just because you are incapable of properly running your shift. I can see now why Headquarters assigned you here. It's obvious that you need training in proper police procedure. Not only that, you hurt my feelings."

"And another thing, Sergeant Murphy," added Patrolman Knotts, "there's the matter of overtime for your men. Since we are forced to work hours in excess of our regularly scheduled shift without proper notice due to your inefficiency, we are entitled to double-time pay for all such hours with a four hour minimum."

"There's also the matter of possible civil action against you, sergeant," added Harry Krell. "There are witnesses here who heard you slander S&H Green Stamps."

"WHY DOESN'T SOME-

ONE ASK THE MUGGER IF HE'D LIKE TO ADD ANYTHING!" screamed the sergeant. "AFTER ALL, WE WOULDN'T WANT TO VIOLATE HIS RIGHT OF FREE SPEECH, WOULD WE?"

"That's a very good idea, sergeant," said Harry Krell, turning to the mugger. "Son, would you like to . . . Hey! He's gone!"

The entire room turned to stare at the spot where the mugging had been taking place. Indeed, the mugger had departed. Only the woman remained, and she was lying on the floor, very still. Mr. Krell knelt beside her and felt for a pulse.

"She's dead," he intoned.

The lieutenant approached Sergeant Murphy, putting his arm around his shoulders.

"There, sergeant, you see? Everything worked out just fine. Now the second shift can take over. Of course, there is the matter of a homicide being committed as a result of your improper handling of this matter, but I think we can get the review board to overlook it in view of your inexperience. I'm sure you'll work out just fine. Just remember, modern police techniques always prevail!"

FICTION

A Summer Night's Visitor

by Gordon
A. Reims

The trees were motionless in the misty twilight, as still as though they were part of an indoor stage set. The path through the underbrush had become indistinct, and the growing darkness seemed heavy behind him—almost sinister. He paused. He had a feeling he'd left something back there in the woods in his haste. But whatever it was, it would have to wait until morning.

There was something else, too. He wondered if what he thought

he'd seen was still there—that strong suggestion of something yellow, something living, moving slowly toward him, far back in the deepening shadows. Was it just an illusion? A trick of the fading light? There seemed nothing there now but silent darkness.

He stumbled twice as he moved hurriedly forward again on the dark path, and felt a sense of welcome relief when he came out onto the broad lawn, with the house silhouetted before him against the deepening amber of the western sky. He walked around the dark rectangle of his wife's rose garden to the back entrance, opened the screen door, reached inside, and flicked on both indoor and outdoor lights. A few insects circled about him as he paused at the threshold and looked again toward the darkening woods.

It was then that he was sure he saw it once again, just at the point where he had emerged from the woods—that bare flicker of dull yellow; that fleeting suggestion of movement. He suddenly felt the grip of an unaccustomed tightness in his stomach.

He lingered in the doorway and watched and waited. Yes; it was definitely there, closer, and moving. It was on the lawn. The door light and the fading light from the sky combined to dimly reveal a moving slither of deep gold, a small reptilian head, two glistening beads of eyes. Like some tawny living garden hose, he could see it silently undulating as it moved toward him—directly toward him, just as he thought it had in the woods.

Standing still, he watched its progress—sometimes clearly visible; at other times so blurred into the shadow that he was almost convinced he had imagined it. Then he was sure it had reached the rose garden. But it didn't go around the beds of roses and peonies as he had done. It moved straight on into the bed's leafy shadows, noiselessly curving and uncurving. Its course was still straight toward him.

He wished for his flashlight, and remembered that it was in the pickup truck, parked in the driveway little more than twenty yards away. He walked quickly to it and, after fumbling briefly at the cluttered shelf behind the seat, found the object he was seeking. Walking slowly back, he played the flashlight beam at the dark rose bed, and then over the short stretch of lawn between the bed and the door. There was no sign of any creature.

His beam next played along the windowsills of the house, danced up and down along the wisteria vines, and probed the dark places under the heavier shrubs. Somewhere off in the woods he could hear an owl's familiar cry.

He was a few feet from the back door when he discovered with startling suddenness why he had not yet seen the creature. There it was, entwined around the bracket which held the outdoor light above the back door. Its head was poised just over the entrance like a thick golden knot—and its eyes seemed to be looking straight at him. The entire pose was one of waiting.

He'd rather not walk back into the house—not at this door. He headed quickly for the dark area of the front entrance. Flashlight beam before him, he gained the steps and tried the knob. Locked. He slapped his hands against his pockets, but no, he had no keycase with him.

Back down the steps and completely around the house in a slow circle, playing the flashlight on lawn and shrubs as he went. When he again reached the back door the bracket was bare. There was no reptile in sight. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and stepped quickly inside. Then he closed and latched both screen door and inner door behind him.

The house seemed unusually quiet. Because Clara was not there, of course. He found himself gaping at the pot that hung over the stove; the dish-drying towels on the wooden hanger; the calendar in the corner with its little notes in the margins. He walked into the adjoining study that had once been a dinette, then down three steps into the living room where Clara's array of photographs lined the mantelpiece of the fieldstone fireplace. Each room came to life in turn as his fingers flipped wall switches. Then he returned to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator door, and grasped a container of beer. This was what he needed; this was welcome normality. He opened the container, stepped into the study, and sank into the old leather easy chair.

Almost immediately he found his attention attracted to the little west window on the wall before him. Was he mistaken, or had he caught a sudden movement in the hemlock branches just outside? He set his beer on a lamp table, stepped to the window, and pulled the shade all the way down. Then he went to each window in all the downstairs rooms, closing those that were open, despite the warmth of the night and the protective presence of screens. When he returned to the study he was surprised to find that his hands shook slightly as he raised the container of beer.

He sat quietly for a few minutes, sipping, but the silence was almost tangible. Restlessly, he left the chair once again, and this time walked to the dark stairwell. Pushing a button to flood the upper hall with light, he began to ascend the stairs.

It was as he reached the top step that definite movement caught his eye at the window at the end of the short upper hall. A thin curving shadow, dark where it was farthest from the window; slightly golden where it caught the light close to the screen. The window was open about five inches.

He forced himself to walk forward. The curtain had been pushed aside to let in air, and as he approached he could see all of the snake's form. It seemed at first suspended in air with no visible support, like a ghost or an illusion, curled in half a hoop with the triangular head looking straight into the hall. Then he realized it was hanging from the support wire which stretched from the outside ledge to the narrow chimney.

He slammed the window shut and pulled the curtain across. Through these brief seconds the reptile had been motionless, the yellow, looping cords seeming enormous. He closed all the remaining upstairs windows. The attic? No, he wouldn't worry there; he'd just make sure the attic door itself was firmly closed.

He walked into the square front bedroom, with its flower-patterned wallpaper. Here the stillness and Clara's absence seemed doubly noticeable. He decided then that he would sleep on the cot in the study.

Returning downstairs, he went to the kitchen and stuffed a dish towel into the floor opening around the drainpipe under the sink. He made sure the cellar door was closed. Then he spotted the telephone on its blue kitchen ledge, and a moment later was dialing a number from memory.

"Bart? This is Jess. Tell me, did you ever hear of snakes following people?"

"You mean like chasing them?"

"I've been followed by a snake, Bart, right out of the woods and across the yard. It came after me—all the way to the house! It's been looking in the windows at me. I think it's trying to get in!"

A brief silence at the other end. "I'll be damned, Jess—never heard of a snake following anybody. Maybe it has a nest in your foundation or is looking for mice. What kind of snake is it?"

"It's golden, Bart—pure gold in color. As long as a blacksnake, but pure smooth gold."

"Now, Jess, there's no such snake around here." Bart's voice was low and relaxed and somehow reassuring. "Blacks and garters, yes, but that's it. Haven't seen a copperhead or a rattler near here since I was a boy. Where'd you say you first saw it?"

"On the rocks back there in the woods. I wasn't too sure at first."

It seemed to slide off the rocks and come toward me."

Bart chuckled. "Hell, it likes you, Jess; you've got a new pet. Anyway, I wouldn't really worry—it'll probably be gone in the morning. Is Clara worried?"

"Clara's visiting her sister in Springfield."

"So that's why you're scared!" Bart laughed again. "Being alone up there by the woods is getting to you."

"Don't be ridiculous. But it's damned eerie to have a snake follow you—to actually stalk you. I'm telling you, this one came right to the window and looked straight at me with its beady little eyes!"

He heard Bart chuckle. "If I didn't know you better, Jess, I'd think you were imagining things. I sure never heard of a snake chasing a man—they usually try to avoid you. Even a rattler will attack only if it thinks it's on the defensive. I wouldn't give it a worry, Jess—it'll be gone in the morning."

Replacing the telephone, Jess returned to the leather chair, leaned back, finished his beer, and reflected. His mind drifted to stories of the supernatural; to animals mysteriously guided by villainous minds; to hallucinatory snakes. Something he'd read long ago, perhaps in childhood, crept darkly into his thoughts—the story of a reptile whose mind had been controlled by a departed human spirit.

Annoyed at himself, he kicked off his shoes and stretched out tentatively atop the spread on the old cot. The stuffed toy dog from Clara's childhood peered comically down at him from a corner shelf; beside it the old broken cuckoo clock he'd long promised Clara he'd have repaired. He really didn't think he could go to sleep, but he'd give it a try.

Perhaps he did sleep briefly. He thought that he finally must have dozed off, for he suddenly awoke from a half-dream with a decided sense of time lapse—and of alarm. He'd heard a sound.

It was just a small sound, not alarming in itself, but unusual in the house at night. Because it was different it brought back all the deeply seated uneasiness. It was just a metallic "ping"—a muted, gentle, metallic contact of some kind. It came, or seemed to come, from the living room.

His mind raced over possibilities. A moth or large flying bug striking something metallic? A drop of water hitting a metal utensil? But that would have to be in the kitchen. He lay listening, alert, focusing his mind on the recollection of the sound, straining to hear if it might be repeated. And now there was something else—very faint; very slight. A loose cloth being pulled across a

rough wood edge? No, that would likely be his imagination.

His thoughts went back to metallic objects. What was metallic in the living room or elsewhere close by? Should he investigate? And then came a familiar creak—much fainter than usual but familiar. It was the sound made when someone started up the three steps to the study from the living room. He sat up on the couch and stared at the stairway opening. He could feel a tingling at the base of his neck.

He knew suddenly what the metallic sound had been. It had been made by something striking the andirons that hung in their places at the fireplace. The fireplace! The one possibility he'd failed to foresee—the one opening through which a snake could enter. The creature had been on that chimney support wire outside the upstairs window, and had only to follow it to the chimney itself and slip down into the fireplace. Now it was undoubtedly mounting the three steps.

He groped frantically for the light beside the cot. If the snake had crossed that loose board those many seconds ago it might well be reaching the cot right now. He suddenly recalled reading that some snakes can "see" animals or people in the dark through heat-sensitive nodes in their foreheads. Flinging his arms out wildly he struck the lamp, almost knocking it over, but finally found the switch.

As light filled the room he heard car engines. Headlight beams flared across the window. He glanced around him just long enough to make sure there was no snake on the cot or on the immediately adjacent carpet. Then he leaped from the cot. In stocking feet but still fully dressed otherwise, he raced into and across the kitchen. In a hasty fumble he opened inner door and screendoor, and ran out onto the cool damp grass into the glare of headlights.

"There's a snake inside!" he shouted.

Two vehicles were present. One was obviously a police car, with its rotating light on the roof and the loud squawk of radio voices. The other was merely represented by bright headlights glaring out of the dark.

"Mr. Sebring?" A heavy, brisk voice. A strong flashlight beam played quickly over him, up and down.

"Yes, yes. There's a snake in my house."

"A snake in your house?" The brisk voice seemed challenging.

"Yes, a yellow one. It was trying to get in and I closed all the windows, but it came down the chimney!"

"Just like Santa Claus?"

Off to one side, another flashlight beam focused briefly on the shrubbery and then moved to the back door of the house. The figure behind each flashlight was but a vague shadow.

"Mr. Sebring." The figure holding the first flashlight lowered it slightly. "I must remind you that you have the right to remain silent; you have the right—"

"What do you mean?" A confused and wary tone crept into Jess's voice. "I'm only being chased by a snake!"

"I'm afraid it's a little more than that, Mr. Sebring," the brisk voice responded. "Incidentally, I'm Sergeant Brusette, Lakeside Station, State Police."

Every bone and muscle in Jess's body seemed to sag at once.

A third figure, more recognizable, now appeared at Jess's side. "I went into the woods after our phone conversation," Bart Clary said in his low, easy voice. "I went up that path with my son. I was curious, and concerned. I live near the path, too, you know."

He took something from his pocket and held it in front of Jess. "Out there by the rocks I thought I saw a yellow snake, too. But it was just this, dangling across the rocks. Isn't it Clara's?" The object in his muscular hands was a slender yellow belt.

"You left your shovel out there, Mr. Sebring," Sergeant Brusette added in a flat voice. "That's what led us to dig."

Jess covered his face with his hands.

"Under the stones," Bart said, "we found Clara's dress—and then Clara."

"We understood that your wife was to have visited her sister in Springfield," said Sergeant Brusette, "but with Mr. Clary's assistance we contacted the sister and found this to be untrue."

Jess shook his head slowly in the loose grip of his hands. "I didn't mean to kill her," he murmured. "I didn't mean to."

The screen door slammed, and the carrier of the second flashlight emerged. "No snake in the house as far as I can see, sergeant." A few steps from the house he added, "Oh, and the fireplace flue was closed."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

Ice Cave



by Emmy Lou Schenk

Illustration by Jim Odbert

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“Isn’t that something,” Michael said to the third man at the table. “In his whole career, Dad’s never solved a murder case.”

Police Chief Richard K. Wilbur fought hard not to scowl. Lay off, kid, he thought. You say that once more and I’ll start flashing your baby pictures.

Catching Chief Wilbur’s look of dismay, Michael smiled encouragingly. You might almost have thought he didn’t know he was probing a sore point. Haskins, the third man, obviously had his mind elsewhere.

“Incredible,” he said, his voice flat, his gaze wandering the room as if in search of more interesting company.

Haskins was a glaciologist, a darkly tanned, broad-shouldered, chunky young man whose muddy brown eyes seemed as cold as the ice he studied. For some reason, he reminded Chief Wilbur of a cowbird.

“You see, Dad,” Michael went on cheerfully, “Avecina and Antarctica have that much in common anyway. No sir, you won’t get to solve a murder here either, not on the ice.”

The three men were sitting at a small table in the dimly lit Polar Big Eye Club, so called because insomnia is endemic at McMurdo Station. To provide escape from Antarctica’s never-ending daylight, the club’s walls were painted a restful black, its

windows were heavily shuttered.

Chief Wilbur, a grizzled bulldog of a man, tried valiantly to force a smile. Michael hadn’t meant to embarrass him. He was sure of that, except—oh, damn, he thought, suddenly giving in to his true feelings with a sigh. Sixty only, but he felt older than Methuselah. It was being surrounded by these kids, these eager beaver young scientists with their Ph.D.’s and their university jargon. Some treated him with exaggerated respect, as if he were a fragile, but possibly valuable, antique. Others, and this was worse, took no notice of him at all. Cold enough for you, sir, they’d ask, and then, without waiting for an answer, go on to some topic they considered more relevant.

And why in the world did Michael keep telling everyone that he, Chief Wilbur, had been police chief of Avecina, Florida, for twenty-two years, but had yet to close the book on a murder. Maybe Mike didn’t mean it that way, but somehow he made it sound—well, as if this deficiency showed a lack of manhood in some way.

He’d like to straighten the kid out right this minute, but of course he couldn’t, not with Haskins at the table.

“Okay, you guys, you win,” he said, as heartily as possible.

"Buy you another round?"

Haskins' restless eyes had found a target. "Thanks, no." He pushed back his chair. "Joe's here now."

Glass in hand, he walked across the room to stand at the bar with the sweet-faced seismologist with the chirrupy voice, the one who reminded Chief Wilbur of a bluebird. Little Joe, Michael had said his name was. Little Joe Guthrie.

"Those poor guys," said Michael. "They really got screwed over this last month."

"Look here, Mike," said Chief Wilbur, deciding to get it over with. "Why do you keep saying that?"

Michael looked up in surprise. "I only said it once. Well, it's like this. They had this experiment designed, doing ice core samples over on the Filchner ice shelf, but the arrangements got bollixed up, and now it's too late in the season for them to go out."

"Too bad," said Chief Wilburn. "But that's not—"

"Of course, maybe it's just as well," Michael broke in. "Those two-man expeditions are the pits. That's why Admiral Byrd insisted on three guys or more—two to fight and the third to keep order."

"Byrd, hey. He was one of my heroes."

"Right, Dad. You never met a bird you didn't like."

Chief Wilbur found he was staring at Joe and Haskins, hunched now in deep discussion over their beers. Little Joe was definitely a bluebird. A bright blue tasselled stocking cap hid his sandy hair, a blue wool shirt opened down the front to reveal a red T-shirt. Bluebirds were an engaging species. Cowbirds, on the other hand, had the unlvely habit of laying their eggs in other birds' nests.

"I don't like cowbirds much," he said.

"Not to worry," said Michael. "No cowbirds on the ice."

"I know. But what I—"

"I'm trying to explain, Dad," Michael broke in once again. "The tents are cone-shaped, you can't stand up in them, so if a blizzard whips up, you can be stuck in your sleeping bag for days at a time."

"Real rough, I'm sure, but—"

There was a burst of laughter from the bar. Someone across the room shouted, "Hey, let us hear, too." At the bar, the laughter grew in volume.

Michael waited for the room to quiet. When it didn't, he bent his head closer. "Rough is right. Little things get to you, like the way the other guy clinks his spoon. Or he can't stand how you chew your food, or burp, or—"

"Mike, for God's sake, we're talking about two different things," rasped Chief Wilbur,

then bit his lip. "Sorry, son, I do see why folks would get on each other's nerves, maybe even kill each other off once in a while, so why . . ."

Michael reached out to pat his shoulder. "Oh, that's what ruffled your feathers. I'm sorry but, you see, you won't solve a murder here because there won't be one. Guys who come on the ice, they know what they're getting into. Funny thing, but there's never been a murder in Antarctica."

"Never?"

Haskins and Little Joe were heading out the door.

"Nope. And a good thing, too, because there's no real government here—just the international treaty. The navy personnel are under military law, but nobody has any control at all over us civilians."

"No kidding." Rocking back in his chair, Chief Wilbur considered what Michael had said. It was incredible. The fifth largest continent in the world, and no police force. A million questions came to mind, but all were cut off by a loud groan from Michael.

"Damn it all. Look who just came in."

Chief Wilbur's chair legs thumped to the floor.

"Over there." Mike pointed to a man who stood by the door surveying the room. His green parka marked him as navy per-

sonnel. The USARP scientists wore red.

"Who is he?"

"The helo pilot. I hope the trip's not off again."

"Me, too," Chief Wilbur agreed somewhat despondently. More even than solving a murder case, Chief Wilbur wanted to visit the Emperor penguin nesting ground at Cape Crozier on the far side of Ross Island. Every time Mike managed to arrange a flight, however, the weather turned sour.

But not this time. The weather, the pilot reported, was fine. Only the mags were on the fritz.

Later, as they walked down the icy, rutted road to the dormitory, Chief Wilbur found himself marveling, as he had since his arrival, at man's incredible ability to foul his own nest.

Antarctica was the most beautiful place he'd ever seen; McMurdo Station was the ugliest. Rising from hut point, which jutted out into the ice-flecked purity of McMurdo Sound, Mac Town appeared to have been designed with all the care and precision of an angry child dumping out a box of blocks. Hemmed in by a ring of squat round fuel tanks and spiky antennas, the one hundred or so temporary-looking buildings were linked by a spiderweb of

heavily insulated heating pipes. Disorderly dumps of supplies and equipment lay strewn about, seemingly without plan. Over all hung the acrid scent of diesel oil.

I shouldn't have come, he thought, suddenly homesick for the clean warm air of the Everglades. Wondering if his thin Florida blood would ever adapt, Chief Wilbur stared across McMurdo Sound at the ice-covered Transantarctic Mountains. Pink-tinged from the sun, the mountains' glacial skin was always on the move, creeping slowly but inexorably toward the sea. Antarctica was a dead land. Only the ice had life.

No, his blood would not adapt, nor his mind either. Never mind how proud he was that Michael had finally been awarded his Ph.D. in ornithology, not to mention this NSF grant to study penguins. Never mind that the grant permitted Mike to choose his own research assistant.

Truth was, Mike hadn't really chosen him. He was only a fill-in because Mike's first choice had gotten racked up in a car accident one short month before Mike was due to depart. I'm desperate, Dad, Mike had said. I need someone quick, someone reliable.

Reliable maybe, but too old. Good Lord, he was probably the only person over thirty-five on the whole continent.

Hearing laughter, Chief Wilbur turned, then gasped. As if to prove his point, Haskins and Little Joe were jogging toward them. Naked from the waist up, the two men had on only their insulated white bunny boots, their knit caps, and the bottom halves of their thermal underwear. They slowed to a walk as they approached, looking as if they hoped someone would comment on their attire, or lack of it, but Mike didn't oblige.

"Nice night," he said. "Out for a stroll?"

"Right on," puffed Little Joe. "We had this phone patch, see? And then I said, hey, old buddy, we gotta do something, a hero thing maybe. And he said, sure, my thoughts exactly. Hero thing, big stuff, put you right back up on top. Care to join us?"

"Good Lord, no," said Chief Wilbur. Shivering, he pulled back his parka sleeve to look at his watch. Just past ten.

"If you ain't cold, you ain't bold," Haskins whispered loudly behind his hand. He threw his arm over Little Joe's shoulder.

"No fair," said Joe, shrugging it off. The two men careened into an alley between two snow-covered heaps of navy supplies and disappeared.

Chief Wilbur took a deep breath. The frigid air tugged at his nostrils. "Jumping jacksnipes! What are they, drunk or something? They'll freeze."

Mike looked unconcerned. "Not likely. They're old hands around here. Little Joe has wintered over twice."

"And Haskins?"

"He just comes in the summer. This is his second time, I think. Maybe third. They're both at the same University. Joe told me once that they met in graduate school and have been friends ever since."

"Maybe," reflected Chief Wilbur. "But at the moment there's bad blood between them."

"Why do you say that?"

Chief Wilbur cocked a shaggy eyebrow, then shook his head. "Instinct, I guess. I haven't been a cop all these years for nothing, you know."

"Come on, Dad, you're not a cop here."

Lips pursed, Chief Wilbur snuggled deeper into the anonymity of his fur-trimmed hood. Mike was right. He wasn't a cop here. In fact, he wasn't much of anything.

Even so, as they resumed their walk toward the dormitory, he found himself puzzling over his reaction. Bad blood, he'd said. A snap judgment. No reason for it, none at all.

Odd, though. He wasn't usually wrong about such things.

"I figured it out," he told Michael the next morning as they ate breakfast amidst the

clanking trays and the smell of bacon in the huge mess hall. "It's because he looks like a cowbird."

"Who looks like a cowbird?"

"Haskins. Do you agree?"

"More of a winter wren," said Mike, responding halfheartedly to the familiar family game. "Damn, the Emperors will be heading out to sea soon. If we don't get to Cape Crozier in the next week or so, you'll miss seeing them for sure."

Chief Wilbur believed heartily in the power of positive thinking. "Relax, Mike. Get your mind off it."

"Yeah, sure, but onto what?" Michael stared dejectedly at his pancakes, then snapped his fingers in the air. "Hey, I know. You haven't seen the ice cave yet. We could take the afternoon off and go there."

Chief Wilbur gulped. He hated caves, any and all kinds of caves, musty places, the walls pushing in on you, the ceilings hung with bats. For that matter, he didn't much care for elevators, he despised small closets, and he could barely imagine why wood ducks and bluebirds were hole nesters. And now an ice cave. Chief Wilbur gulped again.

"Hey, Dad, you aren't scared, are you?"

"Come on, Mike. You know me better than that."

Chief Wilbur's voice was so

heartly it sounded phony even to his own ears. Turning from Mike's questioning gaze, he mopped up syrup with his last bit of pancake and choked it down. Maybe if he put enough weight in his stomach, it would stop doing cartwheels.

The cave mouth was an icy tunnel, so narrow and black that Chief Wilbur felt as if he were about to be crammed into a sewer pipe. Think positively, he told himself. Uh-huh!

"Feet first," said Michael. "It's like a kid's slide on a playground. Don't worry. You've got your flash and there's a lantern down there."

"Who's worried. But uh, say, Mike, how deep in do we go?"

"I don't know. Ten or twenty feet. We climb out with the rope there. See, it's tied to an ice anchor."

"It sure enough is," said Chief Wilbur, who was trying to remember when he had last done any rope climbing. In the army probably, but that had been more than thirty years ago.

Then, with a whoosh, he was sliding down, down, into the blackness. He landed at the bottom with a thump, and immediately fumbled for his flash. The frost-encrusted dungeon, clean as a diamond, glittered like a Fourth of July sparkler.

Michael was right behind him. "Hold your flash for me while

I light the lantern," he said, looking around. "Hey, that's funny. It's gone. All the survival gear is gone." He shrugged. "Well, it doesn't matter. Hey, Dad, isn't this fantastic?"

"Hoo, boy," Chief Wilbur managed to get out. "This is really something."

"Yeah, it sure is. Slip off your mitt and feel the wall."

Chief Wilbur did as he was told, then drew back his hand in astonishment. The pebbly ice was so cold it seemed almost to sear his skin.

"It's old ice," Michael explained. "Maybe half a million years old. It gets colder as it ages, something to do with pressure. Come on. There's a place farther in that has some real neat ice pillars."

"Wait, Mike. Please. It's beautiful, but, uh, maybe we should come back another time, you know, like when the lantern is here, and we could . . . er . . . see better."

The bats might not have materialized, but Chief Wilbur's claustrophobia was as intense in Antarctica as it was in Florida. Worse, maybe. The ice cave was the remnant of a glacial crevasse. At any moment, the glacier might hiccup forward, enclosing them forever in its icy grasp.

But Michael had already skittered across the icy floor and was standing by a narrow

opening on the far side. There was nothing to do but follow.

At the opening, Michael stood aside. "You first, Dad," he said. "I don't want to spoil it for you."

Chief Wilbur's heart was pounding so hard he was sure Michael could hear it, but somehow he managed to shine his flash through the opening. The next cavern burst into jeweled splendor.

"Oh, no," said Chief Wilbur. "Please no."

"What's the matter, Dad?"

"It's—it's—" The words froze in his mouth. Bad blood, he had thought, and he'd been right. Still naked from the waist up, his skin marbled with frostbite, the man lay curled into a ball, his back against a dark pillar of ice.

Last night Haskins had looked like a cowbird. Today he merely looked dead. Very, very dead.

McMurdo Station had a summer population of nearly one thousand. Only Chief Wilbur seemed to think Haskins' death was not an unfortunate accident but murder.

Little Joe was in shock, a garrulous kind of shock at first. I gotta talk it out, he said over and over, in the mess hall, in the Big Eye Club, anywhere where he could find someone willing to listen.

Haskins was his friend, he

said. His buddy. Oh, God, if only he'd known where he was. What they'd been talking about was climbing Observation Hill. Stupid, sure. He could see that now. A hero thing. Oh, God.

And the listener would nod, and recall that time half the station went outside and lay in the snow to see who could chicken out first. Or how the Seabees used to welcome newcomers by stripping off their pants, then burying them in snow up to their necks and pouring beer on their heads. That's how it is down here, everyone agreed. Guys have to prove themselves. It wasn't the first time someone had gone too far.

Anyway, as Joe told it, they had walked toward Ob Hill, egging each other on, but then Haskins had said hey let's go in the cave instead, and so they had changed direction. At this point, Joe usually put his head in his hands and started to cry.

"It wasn't my fault," he would say, looking up sadly, wiping his eyes. "There was nothing I could do. Nothing."

For the sun had clouded over. There'd been a whiteout. The two men had gotten separated. Somehow Joe had wandered down toward hut point. Close on to frozen stiff himself, he'd taken refuge in Scott's old hut, found a sleeping bag. Fell asleep.

And all the while, Haskins

was—Oh, God, did you see that bump on his head? He must have fallen, knocked himself out. And then just lay there, like Scott, till he died.

"Oh, God," Little Joe said over and over, shaking his head. "If I'd known. If only I'd known."

"I think he's lying," Chief Wilbur said. "His story stays exactly the same every time he tells it."

"I don't know, Dad. It could have happened that way. Would you hand me that little Adelie we found yesterday."

They were sitting on tall stools in the smelly laboratory where Michael dissected dead penguins, calling out notes for Chief Wilbur to write down for all the world like a medical examiner on TV.

The first penguin had been interesting, but after that Chief Wilbur found himself glad that he was an amateur naturalist who could enjoy the penguins' crazy antics rather than a professional ornithologist who cut them up to find out how they had been affected by pesticides or nuclear pollution.

Turning, he reached into a plastic sack. "But I checked," he said, handing the bird across the table. It was stiff and lifeless, exactly as Haskins had been. "There couldn't have been a whiteout. It didn't snow that night."

"You're talking stateside whiteout, the kind that comes from a blizzard. An antarctic whiteout is, well—" Mike paused to tie a white tag to the penguin's flipper. "It's a kind of mirage. The sky goes white, the ground is already white, and the atmosphere acts like a lens refracting all this whiteness back and forth. It's like walking around in a bottle of milk. You hear a voice, and the speaker won't be three feet away, but you can't see him. You can't even see your own feet." There was another pause while Mike ruffled back the bird's tail feathers. "This is AD-162, a female. You got that?"

"Check." Chief Wilbur blew on his fingers, then noted the information on his chart. "But it doesn't make sense. Haskins must have known about the rope. He wouldn't have left it up at the top."

"What are you saying? That Little Joe murdered Haskins?"

"It's possible. He had the method and the opportunity."

"But no motivation. They were friends."

"So they say, but I have this feeling."

Looking up from the penguin, Michael frowned.

"Okay, okay," said Chief Wilbur. "But shouldn't someone check it out? I mean, like the survival gear? How come that disappeared so conveniently?"

"They say it belonged to a glaciologist who went stateside and took it with him."

"But no one knows for sure, and how about that bump on his head?"

"He slipped on the ice," said Michael, picking up a scalpel. "It could happen."

"Maybe so, Mike, but I'd sure like to ask a few questions. Like, Joe says he holed up in Scott's hut, but how did he get in? We went down there once, and the Kiwis had it locked tight as a drum."

"Maybe he broke a window or something," Michael replied, slitting open the penguin's stomach. "Wow, look at this fish. I've never seen one like it before."

"Yes, but does anyone know for sure?"

"For God's sake, Dad, would you drop it, please? All this talk breaks my concentration."

"Sorry, son. I'll try."

Carefully assuming a look which he hoped showed great interest, Chief Wilbur considered the half digested fish. He supposed he'd have to write that up, too. Professional and amateur, hoo, boy, what a difference.

Suddenly he slapped his hand to his forehead. You dummy, he told himself, you're a professional, too. And if a policeman wanted to investigate a murder, he sure didn't need per-

mission from an ornithologist, even if the ornithologist was his own kid.

Particularly if it was his own kid.

First he'd check on that phone patch, if indeed the two men had really gotten one through. He'd bet a bundle no one else had thought to ask.

The ham shack was warm and cosy, unlike the frigid Jamesway hut where Mike worked. The room was small, with a linoleum floor and stained plywood walls, three of which were hung with maps, the world, New Zealand, a big one of the United States stuck with multicolored pins. On the fourth, there was a battered bank of radios.

The system was simple, yet akin to magic, or at least as far as Chief Wilbur was concerned. Basically, the radioman contacted a ham back in the States who somehow connected his radio to a telephone, then placed a collect call, and the next thing you knew you were talking through thin air to someone twelve thousand miles away. I love you, I miss you, I'm getting pretty horny. The lack of privacy did little to inhibit the conversations.

"Hey, man," the radioman greeted him, his hand over the mike. "What can I do for you?"

He was a dumpy kid, pushing

twenty maybe, but not too hard, and he had bright red hair which stuck up through his headset like a cockscomb.

"I'd like to get through to my wife."

"Don't everybody, man. Well, it's pretty early but I'll give it a go."

Wondering what time it was back in Florida, Chief Wilbur gave him the number. It was seven P.M. here, but time zones have no meaning in Antarctica. The longitude lines were so close that the whole continent stuck with Greenwich Mean Time. It was easier that way, not so confusing.

Unless, of course, you were trying to call home. The call was placed easily enough, but the phone merely rang and rang.

"Probably out soaking up some rays," said the kid.

He means sunbathing, thought Chief Wilbur, revising his calculations. Apparently you didn't add time when you called the States. You subtracted it.

"Yeah, I suppose," he said, then added casually, "Say, you weren't by any chance on duty the night Haskins was ki . . . , I mean, died, were you?"

"Like, wow, talk about your basic tragedy." The kid wiped his forearm across his eyes. "And him talking to his wife only a few hours before."

"So you were here—on duty, I mean."

"Oh, man, was I ever. I thought Little Joe was going to toss his cookies right on the mike. Or was it Haskins? They were both acting kind of funny. Too much beer, I think. His wife is pregnant."

"Pregnant?" Chief Wilbur felt his jaw sag.

"Yeah, and that was the first news he'd had of it. Well, that's how it goes, I guess."

But that isn't usually how it goes, thought Chief Wilbur as he crunched down the ice-covered road to the dormitory. Pregnant! Poor Mrs. Haskins.

A week slid by. Mike's grant gave him two months to collect data, the first two weeks on his own, the next four with the aid of a research assistant, the last two on his own again. As a result, Chief Wilbur's stint of note-taking and preparing slides and keeping track of a million plastic Baggies, each of which contained a pickled sliver of penguin heart or lung or brain, was nearly over.

Research. Chief Wilbur hoped Mike's was going better than his. So far, a big goose egg.

Carding his way into Little Joe's room had been easy, but the search had revealed nothing of importance. Little Joe was obsessively neat. His papers, books, and clothes were arranged with meticulous pre-

cision. There were no personal letters. The only things in sight that did not pertain to Joe's work was a new insurance policy, signed and stuck into a stamped envelope. The beneficiary was, naturally enough, his wife. No mystery here. Who wouldn't be concerned with the safety and future of one's loved ones after such a tragic brush with death.

Deciding to take the bull by the horns, he cornered Joe in the mess hall, but their conversation yielded nothing new. After his initial spate of verbal diarrhea, Joe had turned sullen and uncommunicative.

"Drinks a lot, too," said the bartender at the Big Eye Club. "But no wonder. Three and a half months on the ice with nothing to show for it, and then his buddy kicks off that way."

"Three and a half months? But Haskins had only been here a few weeks," said Chief Wilbur. "Didn't they come down together?"

Shaking his head, the bartender swirled a beer stein on a suds-filled brush. "Uh-uh. Little Joe was the setup man. He came in on the first flight in September. Haskins had to teach or something."

"Did Haskins blame Joe for the screw-up in their plans?"

The bartender hung up the clean glass on an overhead rack. "He might have," he said, after

a long moment. "He was pretty mad. Kept talking about how everything would go to hell if they didn't get out in the field. He was like the chief honcho. Joe always kowtowed to him."

"Bluebirds are pretty passive," mused Chief Wilbur.

"What?"

"Nothing, just a thought."

The bartender's remarks were interesting, but didn't exactly contradict Little Joe's story. Nothing did. Even the New Zealanders corroborated it. Yes, they said, a window had been broken, the contents of the hut disturbed. Nobody knew exactly what had happened to the missing survival gear. Nobody cared, either.

By the week's end Chief Wilbur had meticulously covered all the bases—all, that is, but one.

Well, he'd gone down in that blasted cave once, hadn't he. It should be easier the second time.

It was worse.

Someone had fixed metal strips across the cave mouth, and plunked a sign alongside. Squinting because his eyes seemed to have gone all funny, Chief Wilbur bent to read the sign.

"Off Limits."

Because of Haskins' death, he wondered? Or had the navy brass decided the cave was un-

safe for other reasons?

Trying to ignore his churning stomach, he took a deep breath, sat down on the edge, slung his bag of equipment over his shoulder, then, flashlight at ready, stuck his feet into the hole.

Oh, dear Lord, wait. The rope. He'd forgotten to toss it in. Maybe Haskins had forgotten, too.

No, he thought, remembering Haskins' cold, muddy eyes. Haskins wouldn't forget. He was an old hand down here. Used to danger. Used to thinking ahead.

The slide into the cave was like falling endlessly into eternity, but not to worry. Somehow he'd scrambled out once before, although for the life of him he couldn't remember how.

At the bottom, he stood for a moment. The surprising thing was the silence. With Michael there had been conversation, but now there was silence enough to hear the air bubbles in the ice pop, to hear the glacier groan. Was it preparing to surge? Were the glacial jaws about to snap shut?

No sir, he sure wouldn't have to worry about getting back up that tunnel. The real trick would be to stay down long enough to make a thorough search. Shine the flash, up, down, over. Repeat slowly. Done. The first

cave was just as it had been before, clean as a diamond.

On to the second. Get it over with. There'd be nothing there either. He knew that now, knew he was only down here to prove something or other to somebody. But to whom? Mike didn't even know he was here. Nobody knew he was here. In fact, it was dumb to be down here. All at once the desire to turn and run nearly overwhelmed him.

Take it easy, he told himself. Only another minute or two. All he had to do was take a quick look, then he could leave.

Forcing himself forward, each footstep a minor triumph, he ran his flash over the pebbly side walls of the second cave. Up, over a few feet, down. Quick, yes, but thorough, too. A careful search. Nothing. Now, the ceiling. Across, back. Nothing.

Finally, hearing the ice creak all around him, he ran the flashlight beam over to the dark pillar of ice where Haskins had lain. Up, down, repeat. The wall was smooth. The thing, when he saw it, cast a shadow far larger than it should have for its size.

A tassel. Blue. From a stocking cap. Joe's stocking cap.

Quickly he started toward it, too quickly, for the floor here was even more slippery than that of the first cave. My Florida feet aren't up to this, thought Chief Wilbur, and then, as if to

prove his point, his feet parted company, his legs took on a life of their own. Frantically he wound his arms in the air, trying to keep his balance, but it was no go. His head hit the side of the cave with a sickening thud.

Well, that explained that anyway. It was the last thought he had for some time.

He awoke to blackness. His head felt flat but inflated, like one of those new-fangled silvery balloons made in the shape of a heart. He was cold, too. Why in the world had Delia Joan turned the air conditioning down so low. And her sound asleep, and not the least bit worried.

For a moment he listened to his wife's soft, measured breathing, then reached out to touch her shoulder. "Too cold, honey," he murmured. "Can't afford it."

But his hand encountered only frigid marble. He was lying face down on a sheet of frigid marble. Not in bed after all. So where was he? Oh, God, the morgue.

Boy, what a messed up job. Who ever heard of putting someone in the morgue face down? Besides, he wasn't even dead. Or was he?

The breathing quickened. Someone was touching him, rolling him over. The blackness

changed suddenly to a circle of light, light which pierced his eyes, making sight beyond impossible. Yet someone was there. The breathing went on.

Chief Wilbur stiffened. The light circle moved across the cave floor.

The cave!

Suddenly his mind cleared. Not dead. Not in the morgue either. Antarctica, the ice cave, that's where he was. The circle of light was a man holding a flash. The man was heading for the cave entrance. If Chief Wilbur let him go, he would pull up the rope. There'd be no chance for escape, not ever.

Another accident, people would say, and then they'd remember he'd been asking questions about Haskins and Little Joe. They'd figure he came down here. Bumped his head, passed out. Froze solid, just like Haskins.

Easy for the killer. Too easy. He mustn't let it be so easy.

Stand up, he told himself. Clear your head. Think. No, don't think. Thinking was impossible. Everything was too fuzzy, his brain too stiff with cold.

Yet not too far gone to feel the tassel in his hand. Murder had been done once, would be again. He must act now or he'd be here forever. Do something. Anything was better than nothing. Now.

The blackness swirled behind his eyes as he pushed to his feet, then cleared. Quickly he pulled off his mitts.

"Hold it right there," yelled Chief Wilbur, reaching into his parka pocket as if for his gun. "I'm a cop, you know. I've got you covered."

And then his feet betrayed him once again. As slow and inexorable as the glacier itself, they slid forward until he was sitting bolt upright, his back against the wall, his rump anchored to the icy floor.

It was an effort not to laugh. Some cop he was. If he really did have a gun in his pocket, he'd have shot his kneecap all to hell. But at least the man was returning.

Watching the light beam approach, Chief Wilbur ran his tongue over his teeth. The sour taste was gone. His stomach was no longer churning. Now that the danger was real rather than imagined, his claustrophobia had disappeared.

"Put the gun away," said the man. "You can't shoot in here. Too much vibration. The whole cave could fall in. We'd both be killed."

"Right. Either we both get out or we both stay in. You don't think I'd let you just go off and leave me here like you did Haskins."

"Hey, you got it all wrong. I thought you were out cold. I

was trying to figure a way to get you up the tunnel."

"Yeah, sure," said Chief Wilbur. "Now hand me that flash." The circle of light stayed put. Wisely deciding not to trust his feet again, he jabbed his pocketed hand toward the light. "I mean now. Otherwise I'll shoot it out."

"Hey, man, take it easy."

The light moved closer. Chief Wilbur grabbed the flash in his left hand, pointed it toward his antagonist, then smiled. It was Little Joe, just as he had thought.

"Now talk," he said. "I want the truth. Not that junk you've been spreading all over Mac Town."

"The truth?" Little Joe looked startled. "What do you mean?"

"About you and Haskins. I think you killed him."

"Come on, man. He was my friend, my partner."

"Yes, but even friends sometimes fight."

"Not us. We never fought. Even back home we got along. Shared everything. Every goddam thing."

Suddenly Little Joe's eyes filled with tears. It was strange to see them well up, then freeze into narrow icicles as they ran down his cheeks.

Chief Wilbur watched for a moment, wondering what had caused the sudden outbreak, then decided to leave the ob-

vious questions till later. For now, it would be better to change to a less emotional subject.

"Tell me about the hut," he said. "You know, Scott's hut. What's it like in there?"

"Haven't you been in?"

"Sure, but I want to know what you saw."

"Just a lot of old junk lying around, all covered with dirt and spiderwebs."

"Spiderwebs? Are you sure?"

Little Joe looked at him blankly. "And cold as a bastard too. But I found an old sleeping bag to cover up."

"You're lying," said Chief Wilbur. "There are no spiders there. There aren't any spiders anywhere around here. It's too cold, too bloody cold."

Little Joe straightened. "I found an old sleeping bag. I told you that."

"Come on, Joe, let's hear it. You were down here together, weren't you? Somehow you knocked him out and then went off and left him to die."

"You're crazy, man. I wasn't in here. I didn't even know where he was."

"You're lying, Joe. Look here." Holding the flash between his knees, Chief Wilbur reached into his pocket. "Look," he repeated, swinging the tassel back and forth like an old-time hypnotist with a shiny watch. "I found this down here. You left him down here to freeze, just

like you would have left me, if you'd gotten a chance. Why, Joe? Why?"

Little Joe stared at the swinging tassel. Its shadow moved back and forth across his face. "That's not mine, man." But even as he spoke his fingers were feeling for the tip of his stocking cap. His lips were tensed in a wide line, his mouth slightly open, as if to emit a soundless cry of agony.

"Okay," he whispered after a moment. And then, almost screaming, "Okay, okay, okay."

"So you did leave him in here?"

"Yes. No. I did, but I, well, it's not like you said. I was coming back for him. But there was a whiteout. I couldn't find the cave mouth. I tried. I really did. God knows, I didn't want him dead. Not really." The tears were flowing again, tiny stalactites of ice.

Not really! The two throwaway words were all the proof Chief Wilbur needed.

"It's not easy, is it—knowing what you did, I mean. Is that why you didn't go home for the funeral? Sure. It would be too hard, wouldn't it. Having to face his wife, I mean, particularly with her pregnant."

"His wife?"

Little Joe bent his head. During the long silence that followed, his shoulders narrowed, his whole body seemed to shrink.

It was as if he was enveloped in some enormous body wrap of pain.

I'm wrong, thought Chief Wilbur. Right in what had happened perhaps, but wrong even so.

"What is it, Joe," he asked. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, God. You ask so many questions. You talked to everybody all over Mac Town." The words were whispered so softly that the scream which followed took Chief Wilbur completely off guard. "Don't you know? Haskins wasn't married. It's not his wife that's pregnant. It's my wife. Mine."

Chief Wilbur felt his mouth drop open, felt a sudden stab of pain as the cold air hit the filling in his front tooth. Shutting his eyes, he listened in his mind to the bartender's voice. Little Joe was the setup man. He had come in on one of the first flights, way back in September. Haskins had to teach the first semester.

Haskins, the cowbird after all.

"They had it all worked out. We were supposed to go out on trek together, a two-man party, only I wasn't supposed to come back. That's what he told me when we were down here. I wasn't supposed to find out about the baby, you see. It was just that crazy phone patch. She thought it was from him, not

me. She didn't know I was right there and could hear everything. My friend. Oh, boy. They even took out an insurance policy for me."

"I saw it."

Fortunately Joe was too intent on his story to notice Chief Wilbur's slip.

"He slipped me a mickey, I think. You see we couldn't get out on trek, so he had to do it here. He had it all planned, only I wasn't supposed to find out about the baby. It didn't occur to me he was the father, not at first, but when we got down here he told me . . . oh, God."

"Told you what, Joe."

"All of it. He told me all of it, how Libby was bored and lonesome with me here on the ice all the time, and how they had decided I might as well stay since I liked it so much. And what I was missing, while he was back there with her. And I got mad, and tried to hit him, but he put up his arm and took a step back, and he slipped—hit his head, I guess, when he fell."

"And you left him."

"He was going to leave me."

Chief Wilbur nodded. "I see."

"He was lying there, and I hated him. I said, 'Die, dammit, I hope you die.' And then, I picked up the flash and climbed out, pulled up the rope, and that was it. I wandered around some, then thought, no, I can't do this. It's wrong. So I started back."

"But then there was the whiteout."

"Yes, and my head was all fuzzy. I couldn't think straight."

"And afterward you wanted to talk about it, but you didn't want anyone to know what really happened."

"My best friend. My wife. Would you have wanted anyone to know?"

"No, Joe, I guess not."

"Will you tell everybody?"

Chief Wilbur bent his head. Mike was right. He had never solved a murder case back home, and he wouldn't get credit for one here either. Not that it mattered. The murderer had already been brought to justice.

"It was an accident, Joe. It's nobody's business but your own."

"Thank you, sir." Little Joe scrubbed his eyes on his sleeve, then sighed. "God, I feel so guilty, like it was all my fault. I shouldn't have left Libby so much. I know that now."

"Maybe you two can still work it out."

"Maybe. I doubt it, though."

Chief Wilbur nodded. He doubted it, too, but there seemed no point in saying so.

Little Joe bit his lip. "Mike sure is lucky to have a dad like you, somebody to talk to, someone who cares. Real lucky. Everybody says so."

"Do they," mused Chief Wilbur. "Do they indeed?"

It was a satisfying thought,

one which he would have enjoyed pursuing in a bit more detail. Unfortunately, at that moment, a monstrous groan from the glacier wrote finish to the conversation.

"Trouble," snapped Joe. "We better get our tails out of here."

Seconds later, they were up the rope and standing in the blessed sunshine. The funny thing was, Chief Wilbur couldn't imagine how he'd done it this time either.

On the day before his departure, Chief Wilbur and Mike climbed to the top of Observation Hill.

"You and Joe have gotten mighty friendly lately," said Mike as they climbed. "Is that part of your so-called investigation?"

"No, no," puffed Chief Wilbur. The hill was only eight hundred and fifty feet high, but Chief Wilbur's legs were more accustomed to Florida's flatness. "He just needs someone to talk to. Anyway, I decided you were right. No need to be suspicious."

They climbed in silence for a few minutes. When they reached the summit, the silence continued, each man deep in his own thoughts. The view across that endless expanse of the Ross Ice Shelf was almost more than the mind could bear. Somewhere

out there lay the bodies of Scott and his men. Turning, they could see the ice runway of Williams Field, named after a navy Seabee whose bulldozer had crashed through the ice. And Berg Field Center named for a man who died in a helicopter crash over in one of the Dry Valleys.

"So many people have died here," said Michael finally, his hand on the huge cross made of jannah wood which Scott's companions had erected in his memory. "Antarctica is framed in death."

"But not murder," said Chief Wilbur. "You said that yourself."

"Well, sometimes I wonder. There are loose ends, you know, like what happened to the survival gear?"

"It's like you said. It belonged to some glaciologist, and he took it home with him."

"For sure?"

"Oh, yes. I checked it out."

He wished he could remind Mike that Haskins was a glaciologist. He wished he could tell him how Haskins' careful planning to do murder had served only to assure his own

death. But he wouldn't. He had promised Little Joe.

"You're a pretty foxy guy," said Mike. "I'm really proud of you."

"Are you, Mike? Are you really?"

"Sure. Don't you believe me?"

"Yes, but—well, if you're so proud, how come you keep apologizing to everybody because I never solved a murder."

"Apologizing! No way, Dad, only when I say you're from Florida, everybody thinks *Miami Vice* or something. So I have to explain that AVECINA is just your normal small town where nobody ever kills anyone. I don't mean you couldn't solve a murder case, only that I'm proud you never had to."

Feeling Mike's arm wrap lovingly around his shoulder, Chief Wilbur smiled. The sun had slipped behind a cloud, and the wind was rising. The wind chill factor must have dropped twenty degrees in just a few moments, but even so he felt warm clear down to his toes.

"Yeah, Mike," he said, gruffly. "I suppose I'm kind of proud of that, too."

UNSOLVED

by D. G. Wells

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

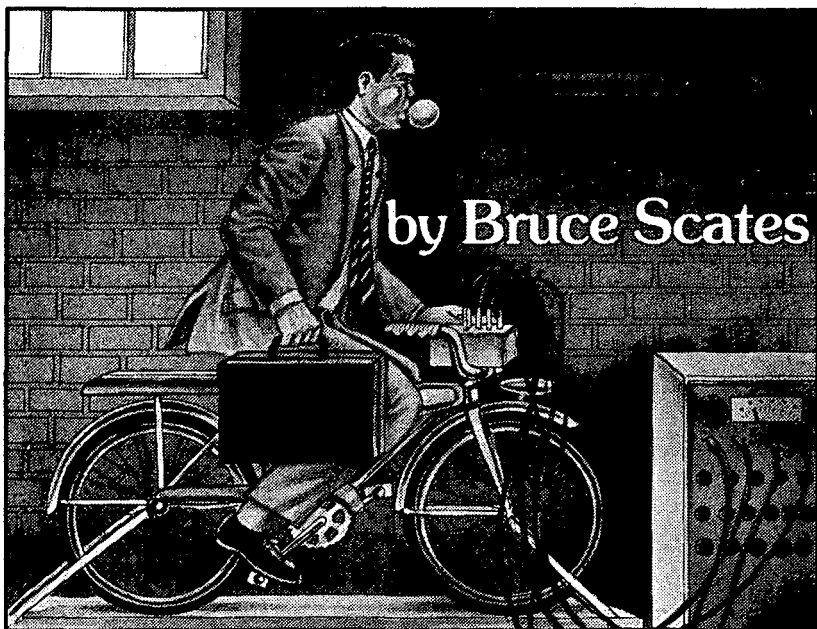
The answer will appear in the September issue.

Jeff Snatchem and his gang of ruffians were about to share the loot from their latest outrage. Unfortunately, when each man had been given an equal share, some loot was left over, enough to give all but a handful of the men an extra gold piece. The argument over this remainder was just becoming violent when some more gang members arrived, and all the loot was shared out again to include them. Each man received the same as before and there were now twenty fewer gold pieces left over. Before another argument could start, the last members of the gang arrived, and there was a third share-out. Each man received the same as before, but there were ten fewer pieces left over. The handful of men who arrived late were sent to the local tavern to spend the remainder on food and drink, one-half of the men drinking beer and one-third drinking smuggled French brandy. While they celebrate, can you work out each man's share and how many members there are in the gang altogether?

See page 89 for the solution to the July puzzle.

"The Golden Handshake," taken from Recreations in Logic by D. G. Wells. Copyright © 1979 by D. G. Wells. Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.

A Tip on Time Machine in the Eighth



The man who had almost won the Nobel Prize for physics in 1988 and just ten minutes ago had nearly won the last race at the Roseway Harness Track mopped his forehead with a handkerchief and said: "Just because I can't

pay you, I suppose you intend to take me for a ride, riddle me with small arms fire, fit me with cement overshoes, and deposit me in the local scenic waterway."

His companion, a hulking man with a too-small suit and

a too-small forehead, who clutched a briefcase and Professor Dworkin, popped a bubble of his pink bubblegum and rumbled: "I haven't got the time for anything fancy, doc. You'll have to settle for something simpler."

Arnie "Bubbles" Clark steered the bald little college professor past the track's grandstand, toward the Collier Avenue exit. For reasons of his own the professor was wearing a false beard, a loud check sports jacket, and a tie that said: "Kiss me quick—I think I'm lucky!" The two men kept well behind the rest of the crowd of departing suckers. Arnie took a professional interest in the latter: he was a bookie. Professor Dworkin was definitely a sucker. Outside his laboratory he couldn't pick anything but losers. He picked them tirelessly, compulsively, and absolutely scientifically.

"What's that in your pocket, Arnie?" blurted the professor.

"You don't want to know what's in my pocket, doc."

They reached Collier Avenue; Arnie pointed his pocket and they turned left. Traffic streamed past them, up and down the avenue.

Professor Dworkin desperately rummaged in his empty insides, searching for a last scrap of courage. He finally discovered a piece he hadn't thrown away on that long-shot in the

eighth race. "That's illogical!" he squeaked, his voice splintering upwards. "You're taking me for a ride over a mere—how much is it?"

Arnie blew a bored, preoccupied bubble before replying: "Thanks to that little pedestrian of yours in the eighth race, fifty-two grand, doc."

Professor Dworkin tried, failed; tried, failed; at last succeeded in snapping his fingers in what had started out to be a casual manner. "*Chic-chick-chicken feed!*" he declared. "Arnie: how would you like, instead of a mere fifty-two thousand, *ten times that? Or twenty times that?*"

Arnie continued chewing his gum, uninterest written all over his bubbles.

"Look at this, Arnie. Look." The professor thrust a magazine at Arnie. A comic book. *The Time Machine Buccaneers vs. Attila the Hun and The Invaders from Planet X*. "What do you see, Arnie?"

"A Bug-Eyed Monster, a guy with a raygun, and a dame with big—"

"No, no," corrected the professor, "what you see, Arnie, is a way to find out the results of horse races before they're run. What you see is a way to pick winners every race out of every race. What you see, Arnie, is a way to go to the bank every day smiling." Professor Dworkin

eagerly smiled. "What you see is—what you see is—WE CAN'T LOSE, ARNIE!" Into the distinguished scientist's face flooded the shining, fanatic, eternally optimistic, mystical look of the two-dollar plunger. "We can't lose, Arnie!"

Arnie shifted his wad of chewing gum, only mildly interested. "Yeah? How?"

Professor Dworkin thumped the cover of *The Time Machine Buccaneers*. "I can make that! Minus the Bug-Eyed Monster and the Scantily Clad Blonde. A *Time Machine*, Arnie! Think of it. It wouldn't look like that, of course. That's just to give you an idea on your intellectual level."

Arnie stopped prodding Professor Dworkin along the sidewalk. And put his briefcase down. And stopped chewing his bubblegum. "Leave my innelectual level out of this, doc. After all, which of us was it bet on that cripple in the eighth?"

"It came to me while I was losing the eighth race," Professor Dworkin continued hurriedly. "It was like finding the last piece in a jigsaw puzzle. *Voila!* A *Time Machine*! All I need to build it is a modest laboratory and a nice little cash flow."

"Where do I come in, doc?"

"Er, the cash flow."

Arnie picked up his briefcase again. And recommenced chew-

ing his bubblegum. "The car's right over there, doc. The river's a little farther."

"Arnie," pleaded Professor Dworkin, "think of it! With this machine, we can't lose. Ever! Ever, Arnie!"

"Let me get this straight, doc. You're going to pull this off by going through *time*?"

Professor Dworkin hesitated. "Uh, well, no. *You're going to do this by going through time*, Arnie. And bringing back the results of future races. You're a man of action; I'm a—a—mere man of thought."

The man of action pointed his briefcase at the car. "Get in, doc. It's been nice knowing you."

Professor Dworkin froze, staring at the briefcase as if hypnotized. "What's in that briefcase, Arnie?" His face looked as if he strongly suspected it was something he really didn't want to know about.

"You don't want to know, doc."

"I knew it! Oh God." Turning pale, Professor Dworkin swallowed several times. In a hoarse voice he whispered: "Go on, tell me, Arnie. Please. I can take it. What's in your briefcase?"

Scowling, Arnie finally muttered, "Records."

"What?" The professor thought Arnie had said "records."

"Records," Arnie said, look-

ing sheepish. "That's the worst thing about this racket. You gotta keep records. And wear a suit and tie and carry a briefcase." Arnie shook his head with disgust. "It's almost as bad as *working* for a living."

Professor Dworkin peered at Arnie, his rabbit eyes blinking. An idea glimmered in his head. "Not like bank robbing?" he suggested.

Arnie ceased scowling. His bubblegum bubbled nostalgically. "Now *there's* a way to make a dishonest living, doc. No records to keep, no briefcases, no suits, no ties. Just a stocking over your head, a gun, and comfortable slacks and shirt. Nothing what you might call white-collar, doc."

Into the two-dollar plunger's face flooded the shining, fanatical, eternally optimistic, mystical look of the scientist with an inspiration. "Arnie—er, you wouldn't have to keep records for this time machine job."

"Yeah?" Arnie said slowly. "How about a suit and tie?"

"I don't see why. In fact . . . I'd *insist* you didn't!"

"You would? Gee . . ." A thoughtful rhythm settled over Arnie's bubblegum chewing. After several seconds, he said, "I suppose a man who went into the future could get away with just about anything, couldn't he, doc? I mean, as long as he came back, and whatever he did

was far enough ahead so he wouldn't ever have to pay the consequences?"

"Absolutely!" Professor Dworkin held his breath, watching the jaws rise, fall; rise, fall; rise, fall . . . "Well . . . what do you say, Arnie? Is—is it a partnership?"

What there was of Arnie Clark's brow rippled like a belly dancer's rectus abdominis in high gear. His jaws churned in *prestissimo* tempo. "How much would this proposition cost me, doc?"

"When I worked for the Pentagon and TECHRAMCO I went Cadillac," said Professor Dworkin. "With you, I'll go Honda."

"Better make it *Schwinn*, doc," Arnie growled. With a startling and rather alarming grin, Arnie tossed his briefcase into a trash can next to a bus stop sign. His tie followed. Then he slapped Professor Dworkin on the back, sending the little professor reeling. "Congratulations, doc!" he boomed. "You got yourself a morally reprehensible partner."

"Again?" said Professor Dworkin happily.

" . . . At the finish it's Quick Goodbye the winner, Who's Sorry Now? second, Pick 'Em Up third, followed by Goldfish and Mandarin's Jade in fourth and fifth, It's Curtains in sixth, and bringing up the rear: Pulp

Fiction, the favorite, in last place. In the third race—”

With a sigh Professor Dworkin flicked the radio off.

Arnie chuckled. “Let me guess, doc. Pulp Fiction?”

“Pulp Fiction,” conceded the professor. “My last loser, Arnie. Starting tomorrow, my luck has changed. Or rather, to be precise, I shall circumvent luck.”

Moving to a large metal cabinet with rows of dials and switches, Professor Dworkin peered at one of the dials and noted something down on his clipboard. He wore a long white smock with “Kiss me quick—I think I’m lucky!” written on it. Over his shoulder he said: “Are you ready?”

Arnie Clark glanced around the converted cellar of the brownstone building. The room always gave him the creeps. It looked, well, *scientific*. Like the mad scientist’s laboratory in one of those ’50’s science fiction movies. “Yeah, yeah, doc. Unless I was supposed to bring a toothbrush.”

Arnie’s uneasy gaze settled on a white sheet-covered object in the center of the room. “Is that the taxi?” he said.

Beaming proudly, Professor Dworkin strolled over to the sheet and grasped a corner of it. “As I said on an earlier occasion, Arnie—” with a flourish Professor Dworkin whipped the sheet off. “Voilà!”

Arnie’s jaws not only ceased chewing bubblegum—they dropped. Staring, he said: “A goddamn *bicycle*?”

“Schwinn,” said Professor Dworkin. He chuckled. “My little joke. So what did you expect on a tight budget—H.G. Wells maybe? This *works*.”

Arnie continued staring. The bicycle—an old balloon-tire ’50’s type—rested upright like an exercise bicycle, its tires fixed to a gleaming base of polished metal. The thing looked as if it was being attacked by writhing metal-eating vines: wires and cables snaked out from the humming, dial-encrusted metal cabinet and clung to the bicycle’s frame and—chiefly—to a funny-looking metal box that rested between the handlebars like a picnic hamper.

“I could have made it,” said the professor, “a dentist’s chair, a portable john, or almost anything.” He pointed at the metal cabinet with the dials. “That’s where the hocus-pocus is.” Patting the bicycle seat, he added, “This is merely a starting-point for your posterior.”

Arnie asked: “Where’s the ending-point for my posterior, doc?”

Professor Dworkin suddenly busied himself pushing buttons, flicking switches, setting dials. “Er, that I’m not quite sure about. I’m fairly certain I can put you into the future, and

I think it will be the *near* future—within twenty or thirty years of today. That should mean that this cellar and this building will still be here, and this country or at least this planet will still be here. And horses," he added, more cheerfully. "And of course the currency system should still be based on gold."

"What the hell else is it gonna be based on, doc?"

"You never can tell." Professor Dworkin fiddled with more dials. "Perhaps at some point in the future, Arnie, another substance might be more valuable than gold."

"Oh yeah?" said Arnie skeptically. "Like what?"

"Anything there's a scarcity of, to create a value. Say, oh, water, for instance."

"You save canteens, doc. My money's on gold by twenty-five lengths."

Professor Dworkin positioned a final dial. He announced: "Three minutes to blast-off, Arnie." Picking up a briefcase and two plastic bags, he held them out to Arnie. "Get on the bike and take these."

"You mean I gotta take a briefcase for this job, too?" Arnie grumbled. Gingerly he sat down on the bicycle seat, clutching the briefcase.

"You'll find everything you need in there for recording the race results. Just go to the near-

est library. The one around the corner ought to still be open. And when you're ready to come back, push *this*." Professor Dworkin lightly touched a red lever on the metal box between the bicycle's handlebars.

"What are these for?" Arnie asked, taking the two plastic bags from Professor Dworkin. "They look kinda like airplane barf bags."

"They're Time Machine barf bags, Arnie. After all, we don't know what the physiological effects of traveling through Time will be. Use them if you have to." The professor smiled at his machine, at his bookie: "Now . . . *pedal*, Arnie."

"Jeez," said Arnie, pedaling.

A moment later the professor threw a final switch, the humming accelerated—there was a *whoosh!*—the room seemed to darken, and the bicycle turned into an elevator dropping from the top of Mount Everest.

Arnie's head lurched forward into the plastic bag.

When Arnie lifted his head and looked sourly in the direction of where the professor should be . . . the professor wasn't there. Arnie was alone, in the middle of the brownstone's cellar, still sitting on the bicycle. And the cellar was different. It was dusty and piled with a jumble of—not unfamiliar things of the future as might be expected—but completely fa-

miliar-looking objects: television sets, stereo equipment, pinball machines, dial telephones, digital watches. There was also a stack of cardboard boxes labeled: "Video Games—circa 1983." Above was written: "Ye Olde Antique Shoppe."

Putting the briefcase down on the floor, Arnie, feeling a bit wobbly, climbed off the bicycle. Then he stretched, scowled at the briefcase, picked it up again, adjusted his bubblegum, and ambled to the cellar door that led to the alley. Opening it, he blinked at the sudden flood of light and placed his left foot in front of his right foot and walked into the twenty-first century.

The first thing he saw in the twenty-first century was a Scantly Clad Blonde. Alarmed, remembering the comic book, Arnie immediately looked for a Bug-Eyed Monster. But the second thing he saw was a scantily clad redhead. And the third was a scantily clad brunette. Unfortunately the fourth was a scantily clad taxi driver of the male persuasion, which wasn't nearly so pleasant a sight. *Everybody* was scantily clad; Arnie noticed—the city had become balmy, semi-tropical; clothes seemed to be on the verge of extinction. Textile stocks must be shot to hell, he thought. So as not to be conspicuous Arnie stepped into an

alley and slipped off his shirt and pants.

Just as the professor had predicted, the library was still located around the corner. Inside, it took Arnie only twenty minutes to find and record the winners of the next fifteen Kentucky Derbys, Preaknesses, and Belmonts, as well as the winners in a list of sixty other races the professor had given him. Arnie also threw in a few Superbowls and fight bout results. He and the doc had it made.

A funny thing happened to Arnie on his way back to the twentieth century, however.

He saw a bank. Arnie had a thing about banks. They were his first love—ever since reform school. This one was neat, trim, swank-looking, with big windows and a sign over the entrance that said: "CAPITALISTS AND HUMANS TRUST—*Your Only Non-Robot Banks.*" With a spring in his step, a snap in his gum, and a sappy smile on his face, Arnie strolled inside, not even noticing the sidewalk vendor's stand out front with the sign: "Non-Diluted Water—\$11,999.96 a cup."

Inside the bank Arnie sniffed the air nostalgically, sunk his feet into the carpet appreciatively, and looked around for men in uniforms. He spotted several, with at least one of them standing next to each of the bank tellers. There was one

a few feet from Arnie, kneeling on the floor and removing a thorn from a capitalist's foot. When the man had finished, Arnie ambled over to him and said: "You a dick?"

"A Dick? No, I'm a Roger, sir."

"I mean a *guard*."

"I'm a bagger, sir. We don't have guards. This is a respectable bank."

Arnie was about to ask the wiseguy what a bagger was when he saw what a bagger was. Trotting up to one of the tellers, a plump middle-aged woman made a withdrawal, chattering that she needed to take out a little something to buy a soccer ball for her nephew. While the teller smiled at her and handled her bankbook, the uniformed man beside the teller smiled and began to fill what looked like a grocery bag with paper money. He proceeded to fill three of the bags nearly to their tops. A high-school-age boy in a plainer uniform then darted forward, also smiling, and promptly offered to carry the woman's bags out to her vehicle.

A little dazed, Arnie said: "Inflation must be through the roof!"

"Five thousand percent this quarter!" the bagger announced proudly.

"I got just one last question," said Arnie. "I couldn't help but

noticing but what you ain't carrying a gun, buddy."

"A gun?" replied the bagger. Like everyone else, he seemed to smile all the time.

Arnie reached into his briefcase. "One of these."

He stuck the .38 against the bagger's stomach.

"Oh, you mean a gat, rod, piece, heater, roscoe, or equalizer. An *antique*," said the bagger, peering down at the gun with interest. Still smiling. "I've never seen one before outside of a museum. It's very nice."

"Don't the cops—the police—carry them?" Arnie growled.

"What police?"

"You mean . . ." Suddenly Arnie grinned. "Progress is wonderful." Loudly he raised his voice above the murmuring in the bank: "*This is a stickup. Everybody freeze.*"

There was silence in the bank. The customers looked at the tellers, the tellers looked at their superiors; the superiors looked at Arnie and one another. All had bewildered, uncomprehending expressions on their faces, like confused sheep. Finally a woman with a peculiar hairdo blurted: "*CHiPs.*"

A bank vice-president began nodding vice-presidentially. "That is correct. As in the old television reruns. The social misfits always say that it is a stickup and everyone must freeze their bodies when they

are committing an outrage against the public order. It was a union rule, I believe. Am I not correct?" he asked politely, beaming at Arnie.

"Jeez," said Arnie. "You guys still have reruns? Of *CHiPs*? What year is this anyway?"

"The Year of Our Sony 2008."

"The year of—*never mind!* Just put the money—the dough, the bread, the kale, the goddam currency of exchange, into this bag—no, *this* bag," Arnie corrected, pushing the briefcase over the counter to a teller and tossing the professor's barf bag to the vice-president.

After that everything went like clockwork. Just like in the old days. Arnie hadn't lost his *savoir faire*, his aplomb, his style as a bank robber. He almost got choked up.

There was only one thing left that Arnie wanted to do before he left. He aimed his .38 at a light fixture; he fired.

Everyone in the bank fainted.

"Counterfeit?"

"Counterfeit. Take a look, doc. Half the police force including the K-9 Korps already has."

Professor Dworkin peered at a hundred dollar bill from the roll that Arnie tossed onto his laboratory desk.

"President *Smutch!*" growled Arnie. "Franklin wasn't good enough. And look down in the

corner. *Made in Japan!* And I've been spreading this stuff around town like it was what farmers call manure." Arnie proceeded to call what farmers call manure by his own nomenclature.

"Of course it's not really counterfeit," said Professor Dworkin reasonably. "It's perfectly good in the year 2008."

"Oh yeah, that's right. All I gotta do is tell the patient Mister Law Officers to put it on hold for about twenty years and then it'll be perfectly legit. There's a Smutch in their future. And then all I gotta do is tell them how I got it."

"Yes . . . I see what you mean."

"They just ain't got our *vision*, doc. With my record, I get picked up for spitting on the sidewalk and it's life."

Professor Dworkin got up from his chair and began to pace the laboratory floor. "What are you going to do?"

To the professor's surprise Arnie blew a rose-colored, rather smugly confident looking bubble with his bubblegum. "I'm gonna make the perfect escape," he chuckled. "I'm going *back*."

"Back?"

"To the future, doc. I'm gonna like living in the future. *Everybody's* a sucker, instead of merely ninety-eight percent of the people like now. It's like taking candy from a baby—none

of the saps even carry guns." Grinning reminiscently, Arnie popped a bubble. "And you ought to see what the blondes don't wear."

The professor didn't like the look of Arnie's bubble. With sudden alarmed comprehension he murmured, "The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold." Knowing exactly how Dr. Frankenstein must have felt, he pleaded desperately: "But Arnie—I can't be certain that the Time Machine will put you right where you want to go. It's a prototype. It could be off a little. A few years early and the citizens might still be inconsiderate enough to have guns; a few years later and—who knows? They might have disintegrator rays or they might have stone clubs."

"Yeah, yeah—I know, doc. And something besides gold might be the substance of rarity, the medium of value. Like bees' toenails maybe. And yours truly might be the president of the YWCA."

With a guffaw Arnie strode over to the Time Machine bicycle. He climbed on the saddle and grasped the handlebars. "I'm in a hurry, doc. Step on it."

Following up a sigh with a

shrug, Professor Dworkin gave up. Going to the metal cabinet with the rows of dials and buttons and switches, he began turning, pushing, and flicking dials and buttons and switches. "I'm beginning to feel sorry for the future," he said unhappily.

"Don't worry, doc!" Arnie boomed. "I'll be gentle with the future. All it's gotta do is put up its hands and give me all its money."

Shaking his head, Professor Dworkin flicked a final switch. "The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold," he repeated with a sigh. "Pedal, Arnie."

"Look what I found!" cried the Bug-Eyed Monster, reaching down from its Laktian median height of fifty-three feet seven inches and picking Arnie up. "A five *glom* piece!" Biting a corner of it with his two foot long teeth to make sure it was genuine, not counterfeit, it chortled: "Oh what luck! My lucky day!" Thriftily the lucky Laktian decided promptly to take the unlucky Earthling to ALIENS AND ROBOTS TRUST—YOUR EARTHLING DEPOSIT BANK.

But then he always was a bit of a human pincher.

FICTION

When Auntie Dies



by John
H. Dirckx

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I think almost the first memory that comes back to me from my childhood is that of the sunshine of a late summer's afternoon streaming through the stained-glass windows of my great-aunt Susannah Blandy's Oriental room. My two sisters and I called her "auntie," though we made a point of explaining to our friends at school that she was actually our father's aunt and not ours.

To us girls she always seemed a larger-than-life figure—erect and stately even in old age, with a regal bearing and a languid serenity like a queen in a play. Her world—the huge castlelike house with its rooms full of art and antiques and its extensive ornamental gardens—was for us an enchanted realm where fact verged on fancy, and fairy tales might easily come true.

Four or five times a year our family drove the fifty miles to the wooded hills of Leacock County where Auntie's retreat, Maple Ridge, nestled behind wrought-iron gates suspended from pillars of red stone. When we passed through those gates we left behind us the humdrum world of arithmetic and galoshes and visits to the doctor and entered another dimension.

Nothing at Auntie's was quite as it was at home. The most mundane articles of everyday use were carved, gilt, lacquered, brocaded, or wrapped in silk. When she went outside she walked with a jeweled ivory cane like a maharani's scepter. Her perfume was a heady scent that I never smelled anywhere but at Maple Ridge, something like lemons but deliciously, indescribably sweet. When Auntie hugged you the fragrance was almost overpowering, like a whiff of gas before having a tooth pulled. Her bedroom looked like one of the illustrations in Andersen's fairy tales. Her telephones were silver and her toilets were gold.

And yet, for all its stylish decor and profusion of art objects, Maple Ridge wasn't exactly a cheerful place. To a child there was something sinister and threatening in the silent, shadowy arbors, the greenhouse where the smell of damp earth mingled with the perfume of exotic plants, the long, empty garden paths where bees hummed in summer and winds howled in winter, the discreet, maddeningly slow ticking of the grandfather clock on the landing. As I look back now, it seems that the chilling sense of the macabre that I often felt in Auntie's Oriental room, among dragons with rows of teeth like icepicks and demons with baleful eyes of red and black enamel, somehow foreboded her own tragic death there and the shocking revelations that followed.

Not the least interesting of the curios she'd picked up in her

travels was her husband, Uncle Troy. Auntie must have been at least forty when they were married. They were both well on in years when I knew them, but Uncle Troy was obviously younger. He cut a debonair if rather decadent figure, with curling mustaches and a glass eye, or at least an eye that looked over your shoulder when he talked to you. His voice had an unfailing oily heartiness like a radio announcer's. My mother didn't quite approve of Uncle Troy and never on any account left us girls in his company unattended. He seemed to have seen a great deal of life without ever having suffered the ignominy of being gainfully employed. My father once referred to him as an "accomplished raconteur," and ever afterwards our secret name for him in the family was "the raccoon terrier."

Auntie's history was even more romantic and mysterious than Uncle Troy's. As a young woman she'd been on the point of marrying when her fiancé had left her all but literally waiting on the church steps. There was more to the story than that, and it had to do somehow with Auntie's apparently inexhaustible wealth, but our parents never spoke about that before us girls. Mother only said the great tragedy of her early life had plunged Auntie into a lingering melancholy, which she'd tried unsuccessfully to dispel by traveling around the world many times and surrounding herself with beautiful things.

During my lifetime I don't believe she ever left Maple Ridge, but to my childish eyes she seemed to lead a life of almost idyllic contentment and tranquility there. Childless, unsociable, and uneducated, she made a full-time occupation of looking after her house. The grounds were maintained by an army of gardeners, but the only indoor servant was a tight-lipped, grim-featured cook-housekeeper named Mrs. Rathke, who "didn't like children"—a state of mind we children found perfectly incomprehensible.

I distinctly remember the day my sisters and I first played "When Auntie Dies." We were spending a long summer Sunday at Auntie's. The occasion must have been a little special because the cousins from Delaware were also there—four of them, in assorted sexes but all with matching bangs and buck teeth. The cousins were older than my sisters and I, and they enjoyed teaching us bad words and sending us to steal forbidden delicacies from the pantry under pain of being made to eat broken glass or having our hair burned off with matches.

But on this visit we were all getting on amicably enough. Behind

Auntie's house, a broad terraced lawn swept down to a brook with picturesque bridges and waterfalls. We'd been running in circles up and down the slope, and at last we all fell down exhausted on the warm grass, staring up into the cloudy blue void with our senses still whirling dizzily. The cousins promptly invented a harmlessly irreverent game, finding shapes of familiar objects in cloud formations and identifying them as belonging to the divine menage: "I see the Lord's bicycle pump," "I see the Lord's elephant," "I see the Lord's rain hat."

Not to be outdone, my sisters and I started a game of our own. "When Auntie dies," said Crissy, "I get her cane."

"And I get the player piano," announced Mattie, who was the only one of us athletic enough to pump it.

I chose an opulent pagoda of carved teakwood about four feet high, with inlaid brass, coral, and jade, which stood in the Oriental room.

The male cousins spoiled the game that time, revealing a streak of piggishness that was never far from the surface. Clark wanted "the house and everything in it," and Craig topped that by staking his claim to "all the stuff Auntie has or ever had or ever will have."

But my sisters and I played the game many times afterwards—always when we visited Maple Ridge, sometimes at home when we couldn't sleep, but never in the hearing of adults, who might not have understood our artless, heartless cupidity. It was really Auntie herself who started us thinking that way. As we all sat around the front parlor drinking lemonade from priceless crystal goblets—our mother watching us with almost painful vigilance—Auntie would say, "Steffie, lift down that shepherdess behind you, very carefully, and bring her here."

I would obey, outwardly demure but with my heart in my mouth lest I trip on the deep-pile carpet. Then Auntie would tell us where she'd bought the figurine—Prague, perhaps, or Geneva—and we'd all admire the modeling and the colors and the glaze. And then, brushing back the hair from my cheeks, she'd say, "Would you like to have her, dear? Someday, when Auntie's gone, you will."

We used to think it significant that Auntie never made such remarks when Uncle Troy was present. (When we visited Maple Ridge, my father and Uncle Troy always stayed together in the billiard room, examining military trophies and drinking ginger ale. It never occurred to me until years afterwards that "ginger ale" was only a partial description of what they were drinking.)

We took it for granted that Uncle Troy would survive Auntie, I suppose because her hair was silver while his was still black—albeit the shiny bluish black of the ink you bought in tablet form at the post office. And so we deduced that she must have made a secret will leaving all her treasures to us children.

While I was away at school, Mother included a brief note in one of her letters to tell me that Uncle Troy had died in his sleep of a longstanding heart ailment. I was too busy memorizing French irregular verbs and feigning indifference to the inarticulate advances of a certain halfback to notice that my principal rival for the teakwood pagoda had been eliminated.

Auntie lived out her last years in increasing seclusion, neglecting her correspondence and not encouraging visits. Her age was one of her best-kept secrets, but we knew she was nearer ninety than eighty. Her death finally came amid circumstances that made it a shattering event in all our lives. It was nearly Christmas, and our whole family had gone to stay with Auntie over a long weekend. The Delaware cousins were there, too, with their parents, and so was my halfback, whom I'd finally tackled. Although Auntie's house was full of bedrooms, we'd stayed there overnight only once before, one summer years ago when we couldn't take a regular vacation because my father had had back surgery.

I remember feeling deeply sorry for Auntie. She seemed taciturn, unkempt, and thoroughly bewildered by the sudden incursion of relatives. She kept apologizing to my husband Tom for not being able to remember his name. We gathered that her health was declining but that she had refused any further attentions from the doctor. Mrs. Rathke's disposition hadn't mellowed with the years, and she and Auntie seemed to be engaged in a kind of cold war that threatened to erupt at any moment into open hostilities.

Seeing the assembled wonders of Maple Ridge through the eyes of an adult after an interval of years was a jarring disappointment. Much of what had once seemed elegant and artistic I now recognized as tawdry and tasteless. Not that there weren't some valuable articles among the junk. Some of the paintings were authentic masterpieces. Silver doesn't lose its value because it's used to make a tea service that looks like a matched set of miniature washtubs, and gold is still gold even after being tortured into the shape of a bloated, cretinous nymph. And the teakwood pagoda, looking very

dusty in the winter sunlight, still held my fancy.

We had dinner in the formal dining room with a log fire blazing on one side and a blizzard raging outside the french windows on the other. Mother and I had pitched in and done most of the work in the kitchen, and the two girl cousins were finally shamed into washing up afterwards. Later we all sat around the front parlor looking at each other and pretending not to notice the general air of decay. Auntie had given out stray hints that she might be leaving Maple Ridge, and disposing of most of her treasures by way of gifts to the family. We'd come full of expectations, of which I'm sure we were all duly ashamed. When, at eight o'clock, she yawned and told us all to stay up as long as we liked but that she was going to bed, the disappointment was almost audible.

Something woke me in the night. Tom and I had a room near the front of the house, just over the main entrance, and I'd fallen asleep to the distant, mournful harmonies of several sets of wind-chimes that hung in the porch. It was just past two by my wrist-watch when some sound that I couldn't afterwards remember jolted me awake. I lay still for a while, waiting for it to be repeated, but had fallen asleep again, I think, before the scream came that raised the house.

Tom and I bolted into the dim hall without putting on the light in the room and collided with my sisters. That single, prolonged, ear-splitting shriek had given way to a monotonous, low-pitched wailing that echoed eerily up the stairwell. At the foot of the steps we found Mrs. Rathke in her bathrobe, livid and hysterical.

"She's dead," she blubbered, quaking so violently that her words tumbled forth in a jerky vibrato. "I heard a noise and I went to her room and she wasn't there and I started looking for her and I found her in there." She pointed to the bead-hung doorway of the Oriental room. By this time the senior members of the family were assembling in the upper hall.

We surged into the Oriental room, where the pierced brass electric lamps were all aglow, to find Auntie lying in the middle of the carpet before the teakwood pagoda. She was obviously dead: the gaping wound in her forehead had hardly bled. Three small china figurines, which had stood in niches in the pagoda, had apparently been knocked to the carpet when she fell against it, but were unbroken.

Tom got the doctor's name and phone number from Mrs. Rathke and called him for instructions. To our surprise, the doctor came

to the house at once, even though Tom had assured him that Auntie was beyond help. He was quite young, and my father cynically suggested that he just wanted an excuse to send a fat bill to the estate. But he never did. Instead, he braved our collective indignation and called the police.

Auntie had been under his care for a year or two for coronary disease and arthritis. He wasn't convinced that she'd suffered a heart attack and fallen against the pagoda, as we'd assumed. He considered it equally possible that someone had struck her a lethal blow, and pointed out that a person having a heart attack in a house full of people doesn't ordinarily get out of bed and wander around downstairs alone. Only an autopsy could show what had killed her, and the doctor wanted it to be done by the county coroner.

The arrival of the police called forth a fresh attack of hysterics from Mrs. Rathke and a great deal of bluster from Uncle Gordon, the cousins' father. The police went around the house shaking their heads in wonder at Auntie's museum and examining and cataloguing an endless succession of warclubs, snickersnees, candelabra, and brass pokers. By dawn they had taken dozens of photographs, impounded nine potential weapons, recorded statements from everyone in the house, and removed Auntie to the morgue.

The coroner's verdict that Auntie had died of a simple heart attack squelched the notoriety that her death had begun to acquire in the papers. The funeral was a dreary affair, arranged by her lawyers and attended only by the family and Mrs. Rathke. Afterwards two of the lawyers—efficient, impersonal, and rapacious—came to the house to meet with my father and Uncle Gordon, who were co-executors of Auntie's will. The meeting was private but before the lawyers' car was out of the driveway we all knew that Auntie had left practically no money. The house and its contents were to be sold and the proceeds divided equally among us and Mrs. Rathke. Before the sale, we were to have the opportunity to examine Auntie's effects and might distribute them among ourselves by mutual consent.

It was a Saturday in the middle of summer when, the legal formalities completed, we were finally given access to Auntie's property. Again we all assembled in the old house, scarcely troubling to conceal our ghoulish glee at the opportunity of picking over the accumulated treasures we'd coveted so long, and of carrying off what we could get—by mutual consent. The Delaware

branch got there first. Judging by the size of the rented van in the driveway, they were planning to make quite a haul. Mrs. Rathke had stayed on at her own request, looking after the house with the help of a sixteen-year-old grandson who stayed there with her on weekends.

For the next two or three days all of us led a storybook existence, surrounded by an inexhaustible potpourri of finery, bric-a-brac, and fascinating trash. There were whole suites of rooms with matching furniture in solid, old fashioned styles, chests groaning with costume jewelry reflecting the evolving fashions of more than half a century, and an attic like Ali Baba's cave, whose existence we'd only dimly suspected, crammed to the rafters with the acquisitions of a lifetime. From that attic we carried down more than fifty boxes of travel souvenirs—luggage tags, steamer tickets, menus, concert programs, hotel stationery, matchbooks, party favors—faded, brittle, and exhaling the dusty perfume of places far distant and times long past. And we soon learned something about Auntie that even our parents had never realized: she had suffered from a morbid compulsion to hoard. We found rolled-up Persian rugs of fabulous value that hadn't seen the light of day for forty years. There were leather shoes, boots, gloves, and handbags crumbling with age, moth-eaten furs, and silk ball gowns that had evidently rotted to tatters without ever having been unpacked. In the cellar were thirty cases of champagne that must have turned to vinegar before I was born.

Tom, not being an heir, was appointed to keep a written tally of each person's claims. While the rest of us giggled at antiquated styles and squabbled over the division of the booty, my father and Uncle Gordon attacked a huge secretary in the back parlor stuffed with old letters, newspaper clippings, receipts, and account books. Over lunch they showed us their gleanings. First came a very old clipping that contained an account of a shooting on a public street in Montreal. The victim had survived, and his assailant—our great-uncle Troy Blandy—had been released after a few hours in jail through the efforts of influential friends.

The other two clippings were even more sensational. One reported the mysterious disappearance of Osmond Templeton of Philadelphia on the eve of his intended marriage to Miss Susannah Baldrige. Templeton had vanished without a trace from his usual places of resort, leaving his fiancée disconsolate and the police baffled. Foul play was suspected but an intensive investigation had

yielded no clues worth mentioning. The article was accompanied by a portrait photograph of a snub-nosed and rather priggish-looking young man in a high stand-up collar.

The same portrait appeared in the third clipping, which had been published nearly two years later. It reported, in breathless style, the accidental discovery of the body of Osmond Templeton in an empty wardrobe in the attic of the family home at Merton Park. In his pockets were found a wedding ring and two train tickets to Chicago. He had evidently hidden in the wardrobe on the afternoon or evening of the day before the wedding, become trapped, and suffocated despite, or perhaps because of, his frantic efforts to break out. His pounding and shouting would have been muffled by the sturdy, thick walls of the wardrobe, which stood in a remote corner of the attic. I was so shaken by this story that I couldn't finish my lunch.

"What I never understood," said my cousin Mary Clare, "is where all the money came from."

"It was Templeton's money," explained my father. "He didn't leave a will, but in those days they often drew up and signed a marriage contract a couple of days before the actual ceremony. A court ruled that the contract had the same effect as a will in Aunt Susannah's case. She must have got millions, because Templeton had inherited a string of coal mines just a year or two before he died. Anyway it took her about sixty years to get through all of it."

Arguments over the distribution of Auntie's effects led to an almost permanent rupture between the cousins and ourselves. Our fathers, being men, had little interest in any of Auntie's things, and being brothers they refused to argue over them. Mrs. Rathke was the real winner because we kept giving her the best things to spite each other. At least I didn't have to fight with anybody about my pagoda. They knew I'd always wanted it and it was too closely associated with Auntie's death to appeal to anyone else.

Tom and I stood it in the corner window of our living room, where it looked exactly as I'd always thought it would when it became a part of my home. Tom thought it ought to be refinished but I was afraid that would ruin it. We compromised on a thorough cleaning with a product recommended by an antique dealer. As Tom was swabbing away at it "with firm pressure and smooth, circular strokes," it unexpectedly separated into two unequal parts, revealing a cavity in the base containing a thick roll of bills.

"Suddenly I've come to a fuller appreciation of the artistic merits of this Chinese corncrib of yours," said Tom. "I'll bet your aunt was trying to get at those bills when she died."

"That would explain why the figurines on the floor weren't broken," I said. "She must have lifted them down before trying to open the secret compartment."

With pounding heart I pulled out the bills. They were five hundred dollar gold certificates, and there were fifty of them. Under them lay a little canvas bag of gold dust and a scrap of yellowed paper that we almost overlooked. We turned the bills and the gold dust over to the lawyers next day, but Tom and I burned the scrap of paper that same evening. I remember its exact message:

"My Darling Sue,

"Tomorrow we will be one. Meet me in the attic tonight before the party starts, as soon as you can get away from my sister. I'll be waiting in the wardrobe.

"Oz."

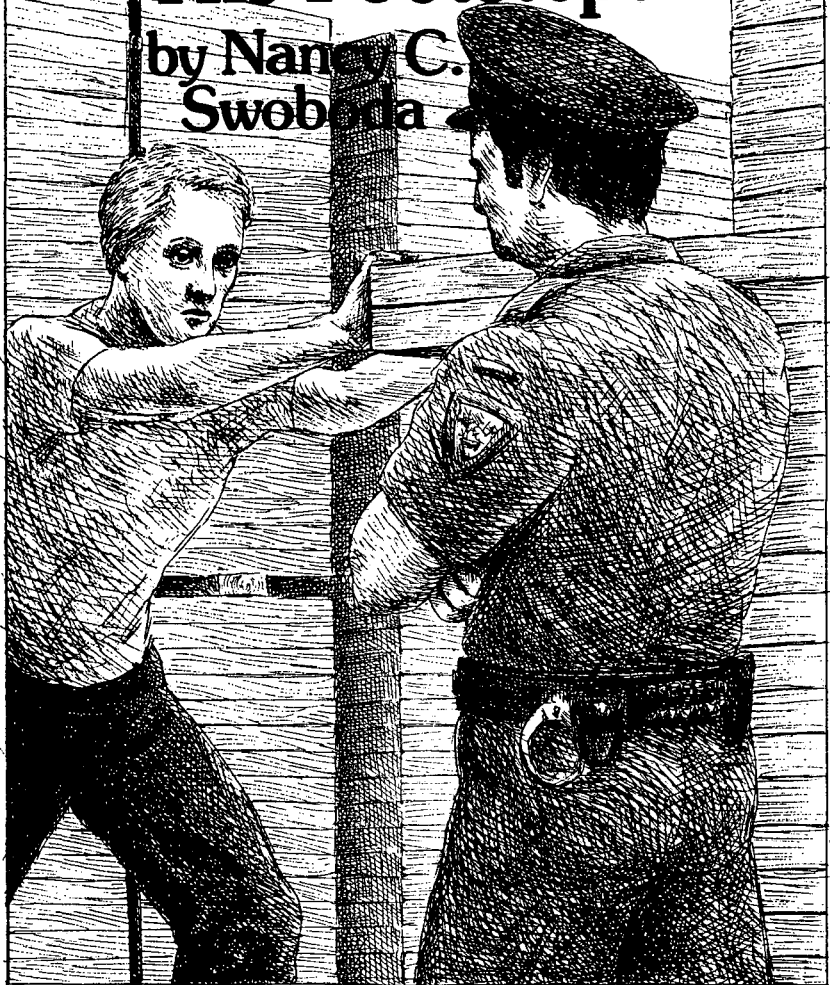
Once when I was very small I remember my father saying he didn't think Auntie belonged to any religion, but if she did, it must be one of those that don't believe in Hell. I was always fond of Auntie, and I hope the rigors of the eternal Penal Code are sometimes softened for persons of that persuasion.

SOLUTION TO THE JULY "UNSOLVED":

Mrs. Noah did remember to turn off the major faucets.

Following His Footsteps

by Nancy C.
Swoboda



Mary Treynor is the county coroner and the only general practitioner in Willow Lake. Truth is, it's hard to get a doctor to hang out a shingle in a small town, too many demands, late night calls, not enough pay. I've been a sheriff here for a good many years and I've got to say I wasn't too keen on a freckle-faced little slip of a girl trying to handle such a job.

Old Doctor Bob Treynor, Mary's father, did just fine until he died. Mary'd been away finishing up her education and training then. Doctor Bob was mighty proud in his own quiet way that Mary was following in his footsteps. That was a few years ago and she sure changed my original opinion in a hurry.

She's up on all the latest medical stuff, jumps in that Wagoner of hers day or night to answer calls, and runs a spit and polish office. Mary's got a lot of horse sense, too. I remember when she told me why she thought she'd be the best for the job.

"Sheriff Haines, I've lived in Willow Lake most of my life. I know everyone, their histories, how things are done here, and what people expect of one another. My father kept meticulous records, and I still have them. All of that helps my doctoring. Why, that's a priceless

part of my education."

And it sure was working out real fine. Everyone in Willow Lake put great faith in Doctor Mary, me included. The coroner part of her work was easy, never any big crime wave here, until last summer when we had our first death by murder.

The Jamisons have the house out on the point and were gone back east for two months. He's a writer and had to go do something with his publisher. Well, they rented the house to another young writer so's he could have a place to work on some sort of movie script in peace and quiet. His name was Robin Winters.

He was a goodlooking scamp. Came to town now and again for supplies. It was on one of those visits that he met Sally Coe. Sally's what you'd call a real looker, leggy, blonde, big wide blue eyes. Robin took an interest in her right away.

Now, Sally was sort of unofficially engaged to Buster Anderson. They'd been a twosome for some time, and everyone figured they'd get married before long. Buster was big and blond, clean cut, and they made a handsome pair. You could just tell the way he looked at her that Buster was crazy over Sally.

I guess it was that talk from Robin that turned her head. He told Sally she could be in the

movies and that he knew some of the right people who could help her. True as that was, Winters plainly had his own designs on her.

It was the liveliest summer we'd had in Willow Lake since the time Fred Miller thought he'd seen a Big Foot in his woods. Everyone was buzzing pro and con about Sally. Would she become a star? Why would she throw over Buster, such a nice boy with a good future in his father's lumber business? Robin Winters was an outsider, so he didn't get much sympathy in the whole thing.

There was a near fistfight when Buster and Robin met on Main Street, but I took care of that. Then Sally's father began to get riled. He'd had enough of Winters filling his girl's head with empty dreams and cussed him out in front of everyone that happened to be at the A & P when he cornered Robin by the meat counter.

The weather heated up and so did the situation. Talk was that Sally was making plans to leave with Robin Winters. She was of an age that her parents couldn't stop her, and Buster Anderson was fit to be tied. He looked like the sky had fallen on him.

Then I got the call from Mrs. Hurley one morning. She was so excited I could barely make

out what she said. The gist of it was that she was at Robin Winters' place, and he was dead.

I ran across to Doctor Mary's and the two of us drove out to the Jamison house in her Wagoneer. Mrs. Hurley was outside waiting for us. She's a sturdy, rosy-cheeked woman, but right then she was mighty pale.

"Thank God you're here! He's dead. I just know it," she moaned.

"Show us where, Mrs. Hurley." Doctor Mary put a comforting arm around her and led her toward the house.

We went in the back door, through the kitchen and down the hallway to the bathroom. I could hear water running.

Mrs. Hurley stopped and pointed. "In there . . . in the shower. Do I have to go with you?"

"No, Mrs. Hurley." Doc patted her arm. "Why don't you make us some coffee?"

I went in first. Robin Winters was half lying, half sitting on the floor of the shower. There was a mostly melted bar of soap beside him. I stepped back so Doc could get a look.

She turned off the water, opened her bag, and took a bunch of Polaroid pictures before she moved the body to examine it. I think I'm a pretty fair lawman, but watching that

little redheaded mite go about her business made me feel plenty lucky to have her on my team. She stood up then.

"I'd say he's been dead since last evening, early on. Mrs. Hurley can help us there, I hope. It looks accidental. See that soap? He might have slipped on it, hit his head. Then again, he might have dropped it when he fell. I'll know more after the autopsy."

"I'll call Jed Chambers over at the mortuary to take him to your office. Now, let's go have a talk with Mrs. Hurley."

She was sitting at the kitchen table and got up to pour us some coffee. She did for the Jamisons, and Robin Winters had kept her on to do his cooking and cleaning. After all three of us had a sip or two of good hot java, I asked her to tell me what she could.

"Mr. Winters had been out walking and came in through them french doors in the living room. He tracked mud and sand clean across my shiny oak floor, and I got kind of mad at that. He went on through to his bedroom, took off his clothes, and next I saw him he was in a robe. He stood in the hallway and told me he wouldn't need me any more that night. I told him I'd fixed a cold supper for him in the refrigerator. He went into the bathroom then. I took

a mop and cleaned up the floor real good and left."

"What time was that, Mrs. Hurley?" I had my little notebook out.

"Dusk. Maybe seven thirty."

"Okay, Mrs. Hurley. One more question. Did you notice that anything had been disturbed?"

"No. Everything seemed just like I'd left it. 'Course you know we've never felt the need to lock up around here."

Jed came then to collect Winters' body and we all left. I locked up the house good and tight.

Doctor Mary called me later that morning with the bad news. "Robin Winters died around eight last night, or pretty close to that. But the shape and nature of the head wound aren't consistent with an accidental fall. I think someone helped him along."

"I don't like to hear that, Doc. At least two suspects come to mind right off."

"Buster Anderson?"

"Yup. And Sally Coe's father, Matt."

"Perhaps even Sally, sheriff. Robin Winters may have had strings attached to his big movie star promises."

I chuckled at her polite talk. "You mean Winters got over-amorous, maybe tried to jump her last night?"

Doc loosened up. "We both

know that showers aren't used just for bathing, sheriff."

I was glad she couldn't see my face turn red. "I asked for that. Any idea what did him in?"

"The proverbial blunt instrument, something like a hammer, I'd guess. I couldn't find any foreign residue in the hair like wood particles, so it was probably a metallic instrument with some heft to it."

"Well, I'd better get busy and do a little bit of interviewing. Damn! Sure don't like the idea that one of our own is a murderer."

Doc gave a sigh. "I know what you mean. Here I sit with the life histories of most of Willow Lake. Every file my father kept on his patients could be a biography, and now they've been passed on to me for reference and to enter more information, sort of like a family album."

"There's always hope that it was an outsider," I said half-heartedly. "Guess I'll start with Mrs. Hurley. She'd know if Winters had any strangers visiting."

Mrs. Hurley lived on the outskirts of town in a little cottage that was as neat and bright as a jellybean. When she opened the door, the smell of fresh baked bread drifted up my nose and made my mouth start to water.

Mrs. Hurley wiped floury

hands on her big white apron and winked. "Sit at the table there, sheriff. I'll get you a mug of coffee. Start in on that loaf cooling on the rack."

I cut off a thick slice, buttered it, and had half of it down before I tended to business.

"That's pure heaven, Mrs. Hurley. Now, I wonder if you can tell me anything more about Robin Winters. Did he ever entertain any strangers?"

"No. He was a quiet sort, worked a lot at his typewriter. Sally Coe paid him a couple of visits that I know of. He was nice to her, a real gentleman. Poor lad. Handsome boy he was. Reminded me of Tyrone Power." She clucked and shook her head.

"Tell me again about last night. Anybody in a boat near the point, strange car on the road? Anything unusual?" I finished off another slice of warm bread.

"Not that I noticed, and not much gets by me. Like I said, I left a cold supper for him. He never got to it. After I'd finished polishing the living room floor, I left and he went to take a shower." She cocked her head to one side then. "Say, sheriff, it suddenly appears to me that you're asking a lot of questions. You think there's something fishy, that Mr. Winters didn't die by accident?"

I stuffed another piece of bread in my mouth to give me time to think. I didn't want anybody to know it was murder until I'd talked to my list of suspects.

"No, Mrs. Hurley, nothing but routine. Just want my report to be complete in case Robin Winters' attorney has any questions. You know how it is with outsiders."

"I suppose so. The Jamisons aren't going to be happy about him dying in their house, either. Let me know when I can go back and clean, will you?"

Mrs. Hurley seemed satisfied with my explanation and sent me on my way with a loaf of bread for dinner. I sure didn't need to take time for a late lunch now. I drove back to town and went straight to my office.

First thing I did was to check with Doc Mary. She had nothing new to report but said Bob Riley from the Willow Lake *Herald* had been over to ask for details of Robin Winters' death.

"I told him it appeared to be accidental, sheriff, as we agreed. I'm sure you haven't talked to all of our suspects, have you?"

"Nope. But by the end of the day I figure we'll have more information to hash over."

About then I looked up and saw Sally Coe coming through the door. I motioned her over and she sat down in the chair in front of my desk. Her eyes

were all red and she looked mighty shaken.

Even in such a state Sally was a true beauty. Her eyes are big, agate blue with long dark lashes. She has smooth, tawny skin and hair the color of corn-silk, and you might guess, the figure is just as outstanding. I could understand how Robin Winters got interested in a hurry. I'm not *that* old, yet.

She blinked, took a deep breath, and said, "I . . . I've come to see if any arrangements have been made for Rob . . . Mr. Winters. I have the names of his attorney and several close friends if that would help."

As a matter of fact, it did. I'd been holding off calling the Jamisons to find out whom to notify until I'd talked with Sally, Buster, Matt Coe, and Mrs. Hurley. I didn't want to put the murderer on guard.

"Thanks, Sally. I'll make a note of them for my records." I took the slip of paper she handed me. "Did you see Robin Winters at all yesterday afternoon or early evening before he . . ."

Her face clouded up. "No. But I wish I had. Maybe this wouldn't have happened. I . . . I went for a drive after dinner to do some thinking. Can't do much of that around the house these days."

"Why's that?" I pushed a box of tissues across the desk.

"My mother and father have been at me. They even invited Buster over for dinner so that they could all sit there and tell me how stupid I was to believe the big line Robin was feeding me.

"Sheriff, I've lived in Willow Lake all of my life and Buster and I just sort of paired off. I didn't know any better and I thought I loved him. I accepted the fact that we'd get married, have babies, and that Buster would take over his father's business."

"Seems to me that would be nice. You'd be well fixed and carrying on the heritage of two families." Hearing myself say that made me realize how set in my ways I'd become.

Sally's big blue eyes gave me a sidelong glance. "You're part of the old school, too, aren't you, sheriff? Well, Robin Winters made me aware of a different world, one outside of Willow Lake." She sat up close to the desk then. "He made me realize that I had other choices. I don't have to stay here and be a brood mare, an obedient wife, and a promotion for my father."

"That's a mite strong, isn't it, Sally?"

"I suppose so. But I feel trapped. Buster's so possessive, and my father thinks only about himself, what it will mean to him when I marry into his

boss's family. My mother thinks the same way."

"You can't blame them for wanting security, I guess. Tell me what happened after dinner."

"Some dinner. Buster and I got into it and he stomped out. I took the car and left then. I wasn't in any mood to eat."

"What time was that?"

She shrugged. "A little after six, I guess."

"Come to any decisions on your drive, Sally?" I was just plain curious.

"Yes. From now on I'm going to be my own person. I don't know if I have what it takes, but I'm going to try."

I wasn't sure what that meant, but there was determination in her eyes.

After she left I took a stroll down to the lumberyard. If I was lucky, both Matt Coe and Buster Anderson would be there. Sure enough, Matt was behind the counter in the office. He's a muscular man, tall, sandy-haired, with those same agate blue eyes his daughter Sally had inherited.

"Hi, sheriff. What can I do for you?" he said good-humoredly.

"You seem real chipper today, Matt. Thought I'd see how much lumber I'd need to build me a shed out back of the house," I lied.

"Won't take much. I'll even

give you a hand." He leaned across the counter then. "Say, I hear Robin Winters bought the farm last night." A little bit of a grin played at the corner of his mouth.

"Yep. Looks like he slipped and hit his head in the shower. You seem kind of happy about it, Matt. Where were you last night around seven thirty?" I winked so he'd think I was kidding.

He broke out with the whole grin. "In my workshop, officer. I swear. All evening." He turned serious then. "Hell, yes! I hated that Winters guy. He comes to town and in nothing flat has everything all upset, turned my girl's mind against everybody with that smooth Hollywood talk."

"So with Winters dead you think things will get back to the way they were, Matt?"

He gave me a startled look and the hand he wiped across his mouth was shaking. "I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean the man had to die. It's just... I've been under a big strain with Sally and all."

"Sure. I understand." More than he realized. "Well, I'm going to mosey out and have Buster show me some lumber. See you, Matt."

"Hey, I haven't given you the figures on that shed," he said anxiously.

"Later."

Buster was sorting molding into the long bins and saw me coming.

"Hi, Sheriff Haines. What brings you to the yard?"

Buster is built like a young bull. He has that pale hair and eyelashes that turn almost white in the summer sun. His face is boyish, but the deep blue eyes are flinty sometimes and when his temper flares that fair skin of his gets red splotches. Today he was calm and smiling.

"Came to see what you'd recommend I use to build a tool shed, Buster."

As he led me to a stack of lumber in the back yard I dropped my line in the water.

"Sally was by to see me today about Robin Winters' death."

"Oh?"

"Yep. Thought I might need names of some of his friends to notify. Said you two had a fight over him last night."

The splotches were beginning to bloom on his neck. "We sure did. I tried to talk some sense into her, but she wouldn't listen so I went home." He stopped and turned to face me. "It's like she's been hypnotized. Damn that Winters!"

"Now that he's out of the picture, do you think the spell is broken?"

"I sure hope so. I have big plans for me and Sally, have for

a long time. She'll come around." "Maybe you should have stayed last night, tried a little harder. What'd you do? Go to Curley's and tip a few?"

His eyes went hard. "She wouldn't even talk to me except to tell me to get out. I went home. Finally fell asleep listening to the stereo. That's better than working on a hangover. Right, sheriff?"

I don't mind telling you I left the Anderson lumberyard thinking I still had two good suspects. I made a beeline to Buster's house to talk to his mother.

Millie Anderson is a sweet and quiet little woman, the type that takes pride in her home and leaves everything else to her husband. Thank goodness Iner Anderson doesn't take advantage of that kind of devotion.

"Millie, I won't keep you but a minute to ask you some questions."

She looked at me in a startled way. "Of course, sheriff. What's happened?"

I ignored the question. "All I want to know is what time Buster came home last night and was he here for the rest of the evening."

"Oh, dear. Has Buster been in another fight? I wish Iner was here. He's away at that convention, you know." Her

hands fluttered in the air. "When Buster came back from the Coes' last night he was in such a state. I've never seen him so angry and hurt."

"What time was that?"

"Around six thirty. He went up to his room, slammed the door, and then I heard his stereo going. Iner should have been here to talk to him. He seems to understand him better than I do."

"Did you see him last night after that, after he went up to his room?"

"Oh yes. He came down around ten when I was watching the news and I fixed him a snack. Then we both went to bed."

"Thank you, Millie. I won't keep you any longer. Smells like you're cooking up something mighty good."

"Yes. I'm making Buster's favorite pot roast. I thought it might take his mind off of his problems with Sally for a time. He does adore that girl." She touched my sleeve. "Sheriff, is Buster in any trouble?"

"Right now I can't say, Millie."

I left her standing at the screened door looking small and frightened. I wished Iner was home, too.

Barbara Coe was a different sort. She's sturdy, athletic, and a goodlooking woman. It's give

and take with her and Matt, a two-pair-of-pants marriage.

"Sheriff Haines. What brings you around?" She was sitting on the front porch having some iced tea, and I joined her.

"Just a couple of questions, Barbara, about last night."

"Oh? What's so special about last night?" Then it hit her. "This have something to do with Robin Winters' death?"

"In a way. All I want to know is where Matt was from around seven to nine."

"That's easy. He was out back in his workshop repairing one of my dining room chairs."

"Did you see him during that time?"

"Can't say that I did. I was too busy cleaning up in the kitchen and worrying about what Sally's going to do."

"Marrying Buster's pretty important to you and Matt, isn't it?"

"I'd say so. It's our future. Iner's older, you know, and he's thinking about retiring. He said he'd like to see Buster take over and make Matt the manager."

"Matt's a good man. Wouldn't that happen anyway?"

"Not necessarily. Iner's old fashioned, and if Sally and Buster marry, the Coes become part of the family. He thinks family runs a better business, has more of an interest in everything being just so."

"And if Buster doesn't marry Sally?"

"He'd be ornery enough to bring in a new man, ease Matt right out of the picture. He's never been one to see his son denied anything." She ground down a piece of ice between big white teeth and turned in her chair.

"Now, tell me why all these questions, sheriff. I know something's up."

I finished my tea and stood. "Not now, Barbara. I'll have to fill you in later. Thanks for the cooler."

It was getting dusk by the time I'd talked to all of the folks that live near the point. You see, the Jamison house is the last one on a finger of land, and the road ends there. Getting to the house without being seen, either on foot, in a car, or by boat is nigh onto impossible. The road is on the low side where there's some beach and all of the docks are located. The other side of the point is high and rocky, which makes access difficult. No one had seen a thing except Mrs. Hurley leaving in her Toyota.

Doc Mary and I got together at her place about suppertime. She makes a mean pot of chili. We ate first and then sat at the table with our coffee while I gave her a rundown on all of my interviews.

She sat quietly for a minute and then said, "We're no further along in sorting out who did it. In fact, we've picked up another suspect."

"Huh?"

"Barbara Coe."

"By gosh, you're right. That never dawned on me, but she has just as much reason and no better alibi than Buster or Matt. Shoot! Now what?"

"You have some more coffee and I'll do the dishes while we both think. Maybe if we figure out how the murderer came and went from the Jamison house unseen, it'll lead to some answers."

I was getting frustrated. Unless the murderer came down from a sky hook or had on vanishing cream, there was no way to get in and out of the house without being noticed. Then it came to me. A swimmer, a strong swimmer could reach the point, creep up the steps from the dock, through the french doors, and leave the same way. If he stayed low the railing would hide him or her, and a swimmer in dark waters after dusk would sure be hard to spot.

Doc threw her dish towel up in the air when I told her. "That's it! Of course that's what happened!" Then she plunked down at the kitchen table and made a face.

"What's the matter?"

"Your theory is great, but we still have four suspects, all capable of swimming out to the point and back, although I'm inclined to eliminate Sally."

"I lean that way myself. Unless she's fooled us all, she sure doesn't have a motive."

We sat in silence, trying to get a handle on which direction to go, when I realized something I'd completely overlooked.

"Doc? I thought I'd covered all the bases but I forgot about one thing that might help. I'm sort of new to this murder investigation procedure, you know. We locked up the Jamison house and haven't been back since."

"That's true. At the time we thought Robin Winters had died from a fall in the shower."

"Now that we know better, don't you think we ought to go back and look for clues, fingerprints maybe?"

We both jumped up at the same time. It didn't take long to stop by my office to pick up the print kit I'd never had to use and head out to the point. I let us in the back way through the kitchen and down the hall. I dusted everything I could think of after we tried to imagine how the murderer had moved about, but didn't come up with anything save a few smudges. And, of course, if you were going to

kill someone, you sure as hell wouldn't leave your fingerprints behind.

We poked around in the other rooms just for good luck and ended up back in the kitchen.

"One thing's for sure," I said to Doc. "Mrs. Hurley keeps this place spotless, just like her own."

"Sheriff! That's it! Remember what Mrs. Hurley said about being mad at Winters for tracking across her oak floor?"

"Yes. She said she cleaned and polished it just before she left. So?"

"So if our killer swam over here, came up the dock stairs and entered through the french doors, he would have had to cross the living room the same way Winters did."

"Spit it out, Doc. My head's already too full of unanswered questions."

She grabbed me by the hand. "Bring the kit. If our killer swam over here like we assume, wouldn't he or she most likely have been barefoot?"

"I'd say so." It was beginning to register now. "Go on."

"Mrs. Hurley polished the living room floor before she left, and so we should, if we're lucky, get a nice clear set of bare footprints there. They're just as good as fingerprints for identification, and I'll bet our killer never thought about that."

Thanks to Mrs. Hurley's el-

bow grease, we raised a perfect set of prints off that shiny floor and made a beeline for Doc's office. She had a file on each of the four suspects, and after using a bright light and a magnifier we had our killer.

"Look there," Doc said. "The whorls and loops on the birth certificate match our prints. Those don't ever change."

We went together to make the arrest. I was glad Buster had had his pot roast for dinner because what he'd get from now on wouldn't compare. Doc stayed with Millie and tried to calm her down. After I locked up Buster, I made all my calls to notify the proper folks involved and felt mighty relieved that Doc and I had been able to solve Willow Lake's first murder.

Buster had been able to slip out past Millie, who was in the living room watching TV. He got a hammer and made his way down to the water where he hid his clothes, all but his shorts and belt, which he wore to hold the hammer. He didn't even know what he'd find when he got to the Jamison house, but it worked out real good for him, since Robin Winters was showering and never knew what hit him.

In the state he was in and as strong as he is, Buster needed only one good blow to kill Winters. It was easy all the way

back, too. He let loose of the hammer in the middle of the lake, swam to shore, put on his clothes, and sneaked back home. By then, Millie was dozing in her chair.

Doc looked kind of glum when she stopped by later to report that Millie Anderson was resting and that Iner was on his way home.

"Makes me sad, sheriff."

"What?"

"Having to use my files that way. My father delivered Buster and probably was the one who pressed his baby footprint onto the birth certificate. But I will say that having the history of Willow Lake as I do did help solve a murder without stirring up the lives of our other suspects and the whole town."

"There'll be talk as it is, but things will settle down in time."

I suppose you're wondering about what happened to the others. Well, Iner and Millie Anderson retired, moved to Florida, and Iner's letting Matt Coe buy him out little by little. Neither family could really blame the other for what happened, since indirectly they all maybe pushed a mite too hard for what they wanted.

And especially I know you want to hear what happened to Sally Coe. Well, good to his word, Robin Winters had given her a letter of introduction and contacted an agent about her. She did go to Hollywood and she's a big star now. You'd recognize her professional name if I told you. She never mentions Willow Lake, but I figure in her case too much information and past history wouldn't be very helpful.

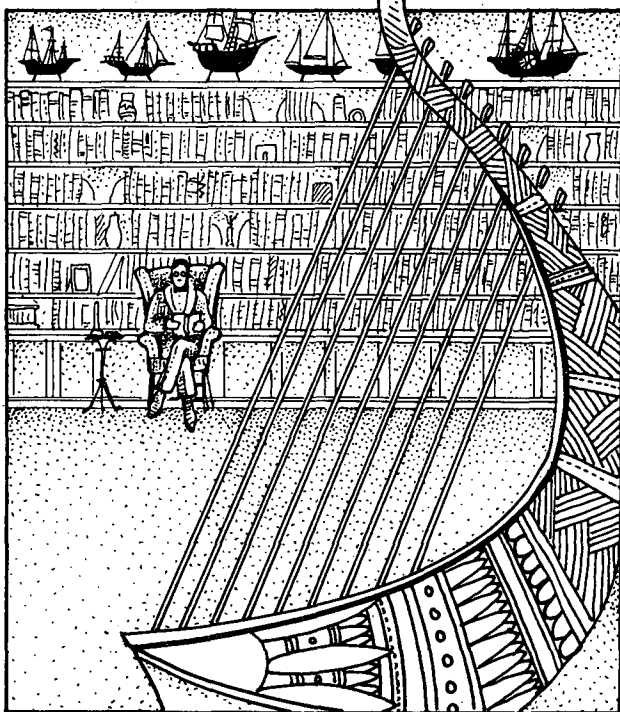


MYSTERY CLASSIC



The Episode of the Vanishing Harp

by C. Daly
King



I remember being asked, once, about Trevis Tarrant—who he was, how he came to be involved as a participant in such a succession of extraordinary happenings; what qualifications he possessed as a “detective” that permitted him to emerge, time after time, with a neat and satisfactory explanation of these occurrences.

It was not so easy a question as it appeared. For Tarrant is not a detective in any sense of the word as usually accepted; nor is he connected with the police. True, he knows a policeman, but then so do I; the same policeman, in fact; a chap named Peake, who is an inspector in the New York department and whom we met through an unnamed friend of Tarrant’s on the occasion of a particularly gruesome murder a number of floors above Tarrant’s apartment. He, that is, Tarrant, has cooperated with the police at other times, notably with the New Jersey troopers on the “Headless Horrors” case, but that was directly traceable to Peake himself, not to any official or semi-official connection with the forces of order. For Tarrant is simply not interested in ordinary police work, which he asserts to be chiefly a routine and drudging attack upon criminals who, for their part, have little to offer beyond brute force and a diseased attitude towards their fellows. Such “action dramas” leave his curious and questing intellect with small nourishment.

Moreover, at the time the question was posed, I had known Tarrant only a short while and his background was still more or less nebulous to me. That he was of independent means, even wealthy, was apparent from the expensive, comfortable furnishings of his apartment in the East Thirties, in conjunction with the fact that he was employed with no commercial undertaking nor any of the common professions. Where he had come from, I had no idea—one does not usually catechise one’s acquaintances concerning their early life and, as our friendship grew, it never occurred to me to inquire.

But, my questioner persisted, what sort of man is he, what does he do with his time, what pursuits—the fellow actually said “pursuits”—does he follow? Here again I was at a loss for, frankly, I didn’t know how he spent his time. Not that there was anything mysterious about it; it was merely that whenever I had chanced to be with him, he had been engaged upon a case, or as he preferred to call it, an episode, “case” being too formal an expression for his activities.

I threw myself back upon memories of conversations with him and at once I realized that his interests were wide. At one time or another he had mentioned psychoanalysis (for which he had no

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use), folklore, and archaeology, with which he appeared profoundly acquainted, wines, philosophy, and literature. While driving with me from New York to Norristown, to the assistance of Valerie, whom I was lucky enough to marry soon afterwards, he had remarked that America had so far produced only a single writer of any real depth, Booth Tarkington. Not caring much about literature or writers, not caring a damn about them just then, I neglected to ask why he thought so.

Then there was physics. He certainly knew plenty about physics. The advanced, theoretical kind, I guess. He had lectured me more than once, in our brief friendship, about the Law of Causation, the contradictory "nonsense" embodied in the Second Law of Thermodynamics, and the traitorous, scientific heresies of Eddington and Jeans who, he told me, "were trying their best to get an enfeebled Jahveh through the laboratory back door." I gathered that he admired Max Planck.

It was his conviction of the immutability of the Law of Causation that kept him at many of his problems when any one more easily discouraged would have admitted a final impasse. "Causation may be a mirage," he would repeat, "but if so, it is not a mirage of nature but of deep, human subjectivity. Therefore, it will remain consistent. Somewhere there is a logically satisfying, causative answer to our puzzle." To find these answers, and demonstrate them, in the strange and peculiar happenings of life that occur, perhaps, more frequently than we realize, was a passion with him.

Such a man was not interested at all in murder *per se* but only in those occasional murders that really offered an enigma either of means or of motive. The most diverse questions caught his fancy. I have known him, in the course of half an hour, to turn his attention and his keen speculation upon the nature of sub-electronic substance, the original purpose of the Birth House of Horus, still preserved at Denderah, the problem of persons recently guillotined in the absence of a guillotine, and the organization of the galactic universe. It was under those circumstances, I believe, that I made the only remark to which he had ever paid much attention. I had said, "You know, Tarrant, you range so far and wide for mysteries that I think you must hope some day to find a really insoluble one." He had stopped and regarded me closely, with a quick widening of the eyes. "You may be right, Jerry," he had said after a moment.

My questioner interrupted me abruptly. "That," he announced, "is the very man I'm looking for. Can you get him to join us for dinner?"

So that was the way in which Donatelli Daben met Tarrant, for the latter was free and we all had dinner at my club.

Daben was a couple of years older than myself, had been two years ahead of me at the same college. I had known him there and ran into him infrequently in New York or at a football game. His father, dead these many years, had been an Irish gentleman with an authentic coat-of-arms and I shall always remember his mother as, I think, the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Before her marriage she had been an Italian countess, making a parental combination that endowed Donatelli, named after his mother's family, with Gaelic mysticism and the intricate personality of the southern peoples. His mother had died the year of our graduation, leaving him a handsome fortune; and not long afterwards he himself had married a Molla Mallory, a typical blue-eyed, dark-haired Irish beauty whom I had met only once, at her wedding. So far as my rather casual acquaintance went, Daben was wealthy, cultured, and possessed of an attractive wife—in brief, on an enviable spot.

That something had gone wrong, however, his questions of the afternoon had implied plainly enough. And after dinner, when we had adjourned to the tap-room and grouped ourselves about a table with our choices in the glasses before us, he went to the point of his difficulties.

"I understand, Mr. Tarrant," he began, "that you interest yourself in—what shall I say?—mysterious affairs; with your permission I should like to have your advice about a matter of that kind that has been forced upon me. Well, to tell you the truth immediately, I should like to have you investigate the thing. Of course, I shall be glad, in respect of a fee—"

"I never accept fees," said Tarrant, with a smile. "Try to keep my amateur standing. I don't want 'cases' brought to me, as would happen if I set up professionally."

"But you do engage in this sort of work, I've been told."

"Oh, yes. But only upon such things as actually interest me. I select my own cases, the basic qualifications being that they must involve an apparently inexplicable problem, the more inexplicable the better. I keep myself free of any obligation, either to the person who brings me the problem or, as sometimes happens in the case of a crime, to the police authorities. I am not amused by crime as such. In these matters I serve only the truth. For example, if you should happen to have a question sufficiently intriguing, my fee would consist in complete freedom of action during and at the conclusion of the episode. I mean that in the investigation of your

problem, I must be free to follow the evidence and the proof *wherever* they may lead."

Daben looked a little puzzled. "Of course. The point is precisely to find out where they do lead. They don't lead me to anything I can credit."

"With that understood," Tarrant pointed out, "I must remind you that as yet I have no idea what your trouble is."

"In order to tell you," continued Daben, "I shall have to speak of my family. In this democratic time heredity is almost taboo but my family have a very long and traditional history, and my present worries are connected with it. About the period 700-1000 B.C. prehistoric Ireland was invaded by so-called Milesians, a people supposed to have come from Scythia, sojourned for some time in Egypt, returned to Scythia again, and finally arrived in Ireland via Spain. The eight sons of the leader-in-chief, one Miled, set out to conquer the island and eventually made a pretty good job of it. It was from the branch of Breogan, one of these sons, that my own family stems. In the course of time and tribal differentiation the name passed through such stages as Dabheoin and many others and has now taken the Americanized form of Daben. The name, Brogan, of course, belongs to another sub-branch of the same original family.

"My own line from the most remote age were harpists, which meant that they did much more than play upon the instrument; they were the composers also and especially the historians and guardians of the clan's traditions. The profession with its secrets as well as its instruments was hereditary, passed down from father to son. There is a misconception among many persons that the Irish harpist was no more than a hired musician attached to the court. This is nonsense, of course; in ancient times only those of high noble rank, originally of royal rank, were permitted the privilege."

A note of pride had crept into the speaker's voice and Tarrant remarked, "I am well aware that what you say is true, Mr. Daben."

"Ah . . . then perhaps you will also know that the earliest authenticated record of an Irish harp exists upon an early monument, the harp upon the cross of the ancient church of Ullard near Kilkenny. E. Bunting, A.J. Hipkins, Kathleen Schlesinger, and other authorities place the date of this as certainly not later than 830 A.D. The workmanship of the carving is crude, but the reproduction in Bunting's book, as well as the original stone, shows without doubt that the instrument possesses no front pillar, thus differing fundamentally from the later *clairseach* of native Irish invention or modification. The instrument I speak of, although played in a

diagonal position rather than horizontally, bears the closest resemblance to the primitive Egyptian *nanga*, which was made with a boat-shaped sounding board, only a few strings, and was played on the shoulder. I have compared it with the three or four *nangas* preserved in the British Museum and with the exception that the Irish instrument is better made and has more strings, they are all undoubtedly the same."

Daben paused and was almost obviously awaiting incredulous criticism. Tarrant, however, smiled broadly. "The timidity of academic archaeologists is one of the bad jokes of present science. I do not share their dis-ease."

"I am relieved," declared the other. "I see that I have indeed come to a man of understanding. For that harp, at the time of the Kilkenny sculpture already a venerated relic, was of course never used but was preserved and jealously guarded in the possession of my own branch of the Breogan line. Tradition says that it was the harp brought to Ireland from Egypt by the original Breogan who, from those remote times, may be said to have been the founder of the whole profession in Ireland, whose legends form a good part of Ireland's most glorious history. And if tradition lies, it remains difficult to explain how an Egyptian *nanga* came to furnish objective evidence of a link between the two countries.

"But that is not all, Mr. Tarrant. That harp, the very instrument which in 830 A.D. was believed by my family to have come from Egypt one thousand to twelve hundred years previously, still exists, preserved by every aid of modern chemistry. It was brought to this country by my grandfather shortly after 1800 and it stands in the library of my estate in Connecticut."

"Well," Tarrant contributed, "that is remarkable. I am glad that we have met if for no other reason than that I may have an opportunity to see this relic. But I judge, from the details you have given me, that your troubles have arisen in connection with this inherited responsibility of yours?"

Daben rejoined grimly, "That is quite true. Back in the twelfth century a prophecy was made about the harp. The Normans had come to Ireland then and they were great hands at composing prophecies in doggerel verse. The original document, almost illegible, must now be kept in darkness, but I can show you a copy. And I can tell you what it said without the necessity of misspelling all of the words. It ran partly like this:

'Once but not twice Dabheoin and Malorye
May wed without danger of traveillie;
If again—the harpe in peril stande.
When Breogan Harpe thrice shall elude
The guardian that to harpe be trowed,
Then shall the race of Dabheoin eande.' ”

He paused, then after a moment added, “That’s all of it that matters just now.”

The voice stopped and Tarrant sat regarding the haze of smoke from his cigarette. Presently he asked, “And has the harp ever eluded its proper guardian, Mr. Daben?”

“No,” answered the latter. “Through all the centuries there has never been a recorded instance when the harp has been out of the physical possession of the head of the Daben family.”

“And you are uneasy on the score of this eight-hundred-year-old prophecy written in doggerel English?”

“I most certainly am.”

Tarrant’s eyebrows were raised, ever so slightly.

“You see,” said Daben, “three weeks ago, out of my apparently impregnable library, Breogan’s harp vanished.”

“Taking your legend quite seriously, I should say, in the first place, that you are bound to recover the harp eventually, and in the second, in view of that phrase about its third disappearance, that it will probably be your grandson who will find himself under the gravest apprehension in the matter.”

It was Tarrant who was speaking, it was the following afternoon, and he and Daben were lounging in the club car of a Boston Limited, bound for Daben’s estate outside Hartford. I was not present during the remainder of the episode, but Tarrant told me about it later and I am able to relate it from the copious and complete notes I then made.

In the club car Daben shook his head, frowning dubiously. “It is not simply the prophecy, which appears to threaten some form of extinction; aside from that, the disappearance of the relic, my sacred responsibility, concerns me deeply. Don’t you realize that this is the first time, the first time in centuries if not in its entire history, that its rightful custodian has ever lost possession of the Breogan symbol? It is nothing that I can take lightly. I *must* make

every effort to regain it, but I have no idea even where to begin to search."

"No doubt it is an ordinary theft. You have been to the police, of course?"

"The police?" Daben's eyebrows shot up almost vertically. "This is not a matter for the peasantry. I have been nowhere near them. Especially as the harp cannot possibly have been stolen. In any ordinary way."

Tarrant, still smiling at the novel characterization of the uniformed forces, remarked, "But if it is gone, it must have been taken by someone. It can scarcely have walked away under its own power. You do not, I take it, credit any possibility of its having assumed invisibility."

"God knows," groaned Daben. "But theft is out of the question. You will see for yourself. . . . I have spent considerable time and money in *making* my library impregnable; the room was constructed with a view to housing the relic. The walls, floor, and ceiling are of reinforced concrete which can be penetrated only by blasting or heavy shell fire. It is ventilated by the air conditioning system of the house, through slits in the concrete, too small to admit a mouse. The only door, though camouflaged, is of steel and armor plate. It has no knob, no lock; it is opened both from without and within by an electrical device, the means for operating which are concealed and known only to myself and the builders. Mindful of the fact that this left undesirable knowledge in the possession of others, I myself later installed a cut out switch for the electrical mechanism, whose existence and location are known to nobody except me. . . . It was out of that locked room that the harp disappeared sometime during the night, a few weeks ago."

"A nice problem," Tarrant acknowledged. "We can only suppose that, despite your precautions, someone *has* discovered the secret of entry."

"In that case," observed the other, "no less than two systems of alarm gongs would have gone off; one when the door was opened, the other when the cabinet in which the harp rested was tampered with. But they did not function."

"Hmm. Well, let us not speculate prematurely. We shall see what conclusions arise when I have been over the ground at first hand." Tarrant shrugged, dismissing the subject for the time being.

They were met at the station by a Rolls Royce and whirled through the rather attractive outskirts of the city. Daben's estate was some eight miles beyond the limits. Turning off the highway,

they sped between two tall gates and began mounting a winding incline, over a perfectly graveled surface; to each side were thickly growing trees, miniature forests already dimming in the dusk, between which they drove up and up and up. The ascent was probably shorter than it seemed for the first time; abruptly they emerged into an esplanade before the mansion proper and into the final brilliance of the sunset. The house, sizable, almost palatial, with its formal gardens stretching away from the side opposite the roadway's entrance, was built of grey stone and occupied the exact summit of the hill. In the distance below, the lights of Hartford were already twinkling and other lights, more widely spaced but legion in number, began to answer them from the surrounding country.

In the broad hallway, a massive fireplace taking up most of one side, Tarrant stood alert for a first impression. A servant had carried his bags in from the car.

Daben, divesting himself of coat, hat, and gloves, which he handed to another footman, seemed suddenly nervous within his own walls. He said, "Seven o'clock. We dine at eight, and dress. Black tie. Plenty of time. Cocktails won't be until ten minutes before. John will show you your quarters." He turned away with a nod and walked down the big hall towards its farther end.

The servant with the bags began mounting the stairs. Tarrant lingered momentarily, watching his host. The latter had stopped before a panel at the far end of the hall and appeared to be running his hands lightly over the carving in the wood at both sides. The panel opened, to a humming so low that Tarrant could scarcely hear it at that distance, and without a glance about, Daben went in. The door swung shut. Tarrant followed the servant upstairs.

His apartments were perfect, even including a little balcony outside one of the windows, from which a magnificent view spread out. A shower, a shave—when he stepped back into the bedroom, his clothes were neatly laid out, from underwear to tie.

It was as he was fastening the studs of his stiff shirt that Daben burst into the room. The man was excited and out of breath; he was still in his traveling clothes. "It's back!" cried Daben. "The harp is back in the cabinet! We must have a drink on this. You must join me." He pressed a button beside the bed, kept his hand pushing on it unnecessarily long.

Tarrant had turned and was regarding him quizzically, continuing to fasten his studs.

There was a knock at the door. "Come," Daben cried. "Bring us some cocktails, John. Anything. Bacardi. Bring the shaker with you." John closed the door.

"I congratulate you, Mr. Daben," Tarrant began; but the other hurried on.

"I went into the library before coming up to dress. Everything was as usual so far as getting in. Everything was the same inside. But the harp stood in the cabinet, just as it always has! I could not believe my eyes for some minutes. When I had somewhat recovered, I hurried up to tell you about it."

Tarrant repeated, "I congratulate you sincerely. Am I to understand, then, that your trouble is over and the affair ended?"

Here the footman returned with the cocktails. The two men pledged the Breogan harp, each other, and the owner's sudden good fortune, before the latter returned to Tarrant's question.

"Of course the harp is back, that is the main thing. I have recovered possession of what I have sworn to guard. But I do not know how I have done so, how it disappeared or how it was returned. It is necessary to discover this. Reluctant as I am to admit it—and I will especially ask you not to repeat this to Mrs. Daben—it appears that part of that old prophecy is true. In some way 'the harpe in peril stande.' We must find out whence this peril comes, so that I can prevent any repetition. That much of our task remains and it is as important as ever . . . And, my word, it is twenty minutes of eight! I must get along and dress. You will excuse me; I'll see you below."

"You may count on me," replied Tarrant, as the other left, "to help you try to discover what has happened." He stood for a few moments in silence beside the cocktail tray after his host's departure, then turned and stepped out on to the little balcony. He had been in the house shortly more than half an hour. In that period the vanished harp, the purpose of his visit, had reappeared. He lit a cigarette.

Or had it reappeared within that time? According to Daben, he had entered the library and seen the relic in its accustomed place almost immediately. But Daben had entered the library as soon as he had taken off his coat; Tarrant felt certain that the door, so peculiarly opened, must have been the one in question. Then the harp must have returned during Daben's absence.

However, he continued, there are elements about this situation reminiscent of a very old gag. Many a lady of fashion has been known to stage a fake theft and subsequent recovery of her pearl

necklace for no other reason than to effect a substitution of a replica for the original, upon which it has become necessary to realize. Could Daben himself, the only person known to have access to the library, have been repeating such a stratagem? Could he have smuggled the original down to New York and smuggled a substitute back again? As to the first item, one could not say, except that it seemed unlikely in the case of a man who made so much of his family line and its heritage, and who obviously had many other resources at his disposal. As to smuggling something back, he had certainly not had it on the train and he had certainly been empty-handed when, under Tarrant's observation, he had gone through that door. A harp of any size at all cannot be concealed under one's coat.

"I think," murmured Tarrant, "that I shall inspect the harp and likewise the other residents here, before I indulge in further fantasies." He threw away his cigarette and prepared to make his way below.

But before he had fully carried out this intention, a singular occurrence turned his attention sharply to these very residents. The broad corridor upon which his door opened led directly to the head of the stairway, but beyond where the stairs debouched, the corridor turned at right angles and was cut off by an inner wall which met the balustrade extending for some fifteen feet along Tarrant's portion of the corridor. As he proceeded soundlessly over the thick carpet towards the head of the stairs, it became apparent that someone was just around the corner where the corridor turned.

He heard a murmur, then a woman's voice; a voice of clarity—and broken. "Oh, Frederick, don't please. . . . I can't. . . . Oh, I do. But I can't now. Please, please. . . . Not while he is in this trouble. My place is with him, I must help him in this crisis—I—I—" A sob ended the uneven words.

Tarrant, whose step had not faltered a fraction during his passage, turned onto the velour of the steps and passed downward. His expression, before he smoothed it out, evidenced his appreciation that a new element had entered the problem.

The drawing room was large, well supplied with floor lamps; there was also some form of indirect lighting and, as Tarrant stepped across the threshold, he noticed, first, that as yet he held solitary possession and, second, that the room was most luxuriously furnished. A kind of combination of modern living room and the "parlor" of his youth.

He turned as a step sounded at the entrance. He had purposely passed to the other side of the room in order to better observe the next comer; now, without the appearance of staring, he made a close inspection of the girl who was advancing towards him.

She was not large—medium height even for a girl; she was slender, with coal black hair and lips of a red that exactly matched her veneered fingernails. As she came closer he saw that her eyes were a deep blue. A face piquant by contour but not now piquant by animation. She looked tired and even her anticipatory smile held worry. Her makeup did not quite succeed in concealing the darkness under her eyes. He judged her to be not over thirty and to be entitled to congratulations upon her choice of a dinner dress.

They met midway of the floor and she held out a gracious hand. "Mr. Tarrant, I am sure. Donatelli sent me a wire. I'm Mrs. Daben, sorry I couldn't welcome you when you arrived." She stepped closer and said in a low voice, "I do so hope you will be able to help us. It is really—really serious. I understand you know—"

"My dear lady," Tarrant interrupted, "I can see that you do not know. I beg you not to distress yourself needlessly any longer. The harp is safe and sound in the library once more."

"Oh!" He was surprised, even a little shocked, to notice the intensity of relief that spread over her face. "Oh. But when, but how—"

This time she interrupted herself. Two men, both of them unknown to Tarrant, were entering. The girl made the introductions quickly. "This is Mr. Tarrant, a friend of Donatelli's. Mr. Brinkerstall, formerly my guardian, now my financial adviser; and Mr. Stuart, my husband's secretary. Oh, Frederick," she hurried on, "the harp has been found. It's been recovered, it's in the library!"

While they were exclaiming over the news, Tarrant found a brief moment to observe them. Brinkerstall must have been sixty, a grizzled man, not ill-looking in his dinner jacket. The secretary was much younger—possibly thirty-four or -five—far from handsome but a nice enough appearing young man. So this was the "Frederick" of the corridor above. And Molla Daben had been the other party to that rather foolhardy, rather compromising exchange. No one, least of all Tarrant, could have mistaken the clear beauty of her voice, even heard around a corner; he had recognized her with her first word of greeting. Were these two in love with each other, carrying on an intrigue under the husband's nose? If so, they had themselves well in hand now; their expressions, their glances were no more than those of good friends. Stuart was plainly

delighted with the news and made no effort to conceal it. The older man received the information more calmly; his felicitations were perfunctory and he gave the impression of considering the importance of the matter exaggerated.

Then Daben came hurrying in and the exclamations were repeated. Momentarily, Tarrant thought, he looked displeased that the harp's return was known; perhaps he had wished to break the news himself. However, it was only for an instant. Then he turned to the cocktail service and insisted upon himself pouring every one a portion for the toast he immediately proposed. For his part Tarrant was thankful that dinner was announced before there had been time for more than two cocktails. John, the genius of aperitif, made a stiff drink, he found.

The dinner was a conventional meal, served by two footmen whom the butler supervised from the background. The wines were good and Daben, with the advent of the main course, ordered a Great Burgundy uncorked in honor of the occasion. Conversation was general and, try as he would, Tarrant could detect no undertones of significance. Everyone took part, with the exception of Brinkerstall who was silent the greater portion of the time; but that may have been accounted for by his age, a full generation beyond that of the others. Also he was obviously enjoying the excellent fare. Molla Daben, relieved of her anxiety, made a sparkling hostess, impartially throwing the conversational ball from one to the other about her table. From the only sustained contribution he made, it was obvious that Brinkerstall, as a financial man, was not in sympathy with the policies of the current administration.

It was fully an hour later when Daben appeared in the drawing room doorway to ask if they would care to see Breogan's harp back in its proper resting place. He had already opened the library door and they all trooped through, into the long, narrow room with its booklined walls, heavy Chinese rugs, its four big chairs and, looming beyond the desk, a large globe-map of the world.

In the center of the floor, facing the doorway, stood a glass-enclosed cabinet. The host pressed a switch beneath it and a concealed light played brightly upon the harp lying upon a plush cushion within. Tarrant, who had intended to ask that it be removed so that he could examine it at close quarters, found this unnecessary. Interested and experienced in archaeological finds, his first glance told him that here was no replica, however skillfully copied. The ancient wood, curved in a graceful bow, the loose strings filling the segment within, the crude but effective tuning mechanism unused

for hundreds of years, all bespoke a legitimate antiquity. It was an Egyptian harp, an original, at which he was looking. But what was that little hole, through the center of the frame? An idiosyncrasy, perhaps, of this particular specimen.

As the others were leaving, he made his request. "If it's all right," he said, "I'd like to spend half an hour in here, alone, looking about. As I cannot operate the door, perhaps you would close it for me from the outside and come back to get me in about thirty minutes?"

Daben acquiesced immediately. "By all means. Anything you suggest. But don't waste your time looking for secret entrances in here. I was present while this room was being constructed, and I can tell you they are out of the question. Searching for that sort of thing would be a waste."

Tarrant, when he found himself alone, did indeed waste little energy on possible tricks of architecture. He quickly assured himself that the entire floor was of concrete, precluding any traps; he inspected the ceiling from where he stood, clear enough in the room's lighting, but did not even make a superficial examination of the walls. Any exit through them, he felt, could more easily be discovered from outside.

He strolled slowly about the room, counting the books ranged in case after case. His curiosity extended so far as to cause him to push back at least a few of them on each and every shelf, but in no instance did he find they could be moved farther inwards; the shelves, evidently, had been made to order of such dimensions that the books just filled them.

He sat down at the desk and began to write: "First row, south—Encyclopedia Britannica, 14th Edition; Dictionary of Famous Men; Second row—Works of Bulwer, Lord Lytton. . . ." He wrote rapidly, but by the time he had finished, more than half of his thirty minutes had elapsed. Above the books a cornice ran round three sides of the room, reached, of course, by the three library ladders on rollers that permitted access to the top shelf. Upon the cornice stood as fine a collection of ship models as he had ever seen gathered in one place. South Sea proas followed in the wake of Yankee clipper ships, Greek biremes and triremes jostled modern Mediterranean fishing smacks bright with their lateen sails, a fighting frigate of Elizabethan times stood between a model of a P. & O. liner and an American half-brig of the nineteenth century. Altogether there were eighteen boats. Once more Tarrant sauntered around the room, sat down and wrote.

Again he got up and this time approached the cabinet in the

center of the library. It consisted of a supporting stand, topped by a box of clear glass set in a steel framework. Somewhere, of course, there was a concealed lock but he did not attempt to locate it. Sighting through the glass with his fountain pen, he took the dimensions of the harp, which, together with its color and other characteristics, followed into his notebook the data he had already collected. Then he brought out his handkerchief and carefully wiped the whole surface of the cabinet.

A low humming behind his back told him his time was up. Slipping the notebook into a pocket, he turned to meet his host's smile from the doorway. "Any progress?" Daben asked. "Have you found any clue at all to this extraordinary disappearance and return?"

"I'm afraid not as yet. Just getting a first acquaintance with the scene of the affair. . . . By the way, that's a fine collection of boats you have; did you construct those models yourself?"

The other was plainly pleased. He said, "No, not all of them. I bought the P. & O. boat and the frigate, too. But most of the others I made myself. As a matter of fact several of them need a little attention now; I've been meaning to get at it lately but haven't managed somehow." He mounted one of the ladders and came down with a fair-sized brigantine in one hand. "I've never fathomed the mystery of how these things wear out." He pointed to a miniature block, hanging from a broken thread. "They do, though; all of them ought to be gone over periodically. I'm going to take the opportunity to repair this one tonight, if you won't think me too inhospitable. I heard the others mentioning a table of contract; but I'm not fond of the game especially and I thought perhaps you might care to play. Or don't you?"

"I should be delighted," Tarrant admitted. "What sort of game shall I be up against?"

"Well, Molla and Fred Stuart are fair, that's all. Brinkerstall's very good. Been an expert all his life; whist, auction bridge, now contract." The door closed behind them and they were at the lower end of the hall. "Humph, I see Molla's had the table set up already; rather taking you for granted, I'm afraid.

"She wanted to play in the hall tonight, by the fireplace," Daben added. "This hall, you see, is a correct reproduction of the chief hall of a castle in Leinster, the family seat of my line for a long period. I believe she wants to spend the evening here, rather in celebration of the harp's recovery. . . . I wish to heaven *she* wouldn't take my responsibility so seriously."

Daben sighed, nodded, turned towards the main staircase, the

brigantine under his arm. Tarrant strolled towards the still empty table.

It was the following afternoon before he found an opportunity to have any private conversation with his hostess. He had spent part of the morning in a further examination of the library, the time from the outside. Combining two purposes, he had gotten hold of Stuart after breakfast to serve as guide, hoping to improve his acquaintance with the secretary and possibly to draw him out upon the matter of the relic.

The first part of the program had been a complete success, the survey of the room's exterior. It occupied a corner of the house and thus two of its walls were likewise those of the building itself. There were no windows; and also there was no possibility of any other exit on these two sides, no matter how contrived. He and Stuart approached immediately to the walls and no doubt was left in Tarrant's mind.

The third wall of the library formed one side of the main staircase well. The entire expanse was visible from all over the hall, from the stairs and even from part of the drawing room; a more conspicuous location for a secret entrance could scarcely be found. There left only the fourth wall, in which the legitimate doorway already stood. Aside from the fact that this position was also conspicuous, Tarrant found it difficult to imagine what function a secret entrance practically beside the acknowledged one could serve. Should one wish to gain access to the room, the proper door would do as well; anyone entering the library would be under observation, and the absence of it, equally in both cases. Unless such a person could be supposed to have been unable to discover the mechanism by which the original door was operated.

But that was out of the question, too. An additional entrance through the solid concrete of the walls argued extensive alterations, which could not possibly have been undertaken and completed without Daben's knowledge. He realized, fully and finally that the only one who could have procured another means of admission was Daben himself. And to suspect him further was ridiculous. The harp now in the cabinet *was* the original, and Daben was unquestionably its legal owner from every aspect. What possible motive could he have for secreting his own property, only to restore it at the earliest available moment? Furthermore, it was now established that no possibility existed of a second entrance unknown to the members of the household or to Daben himself.

Tarrant decided that it was merely his love of paradox that had led him to make Daben his first suspect and that it was high time to give serious consideration to others.

In this connection his second objective, of drawing out the secretary, did not prosper so well. The young man was courteous but reserved. Very plainly he did not desire to enter into any further discussion with Tarrant than was necessary as a minimum.

"I suppose," ventured the latter, in an attempt to surprise him into saying something, "that the harp really *did* disappear?"

The suggestion certainly surprised Stuart; he stared at his questioner before replying, "Well, of course. I should say it did. It was only about ten thirty one evening when Daben raised the alarm. Mrs. Daben and I ran to the library. Dr. Torpington, the physician, was here and came along, too. All four of us searched the room thoroughly, we simply could not believe our eyes. But I can assure you there was not a trace of the harp in the place."

"And no doubt the rest of the house was also searched?"

"Extensively."

"And what," pursued Tarrant, "is your opinion of your employer?"

"I beg your pardon?" The secretary's tone conveyed an almost theatrical rebuff.

"Well, well, of Mrs. Daben, then? Come, man, you must realize that I am trying to investigate what seems a most peculiar occurrence. It is essential that I be able to form some estimate of the background, of the people here, their characters and mutual relations."

"I am afraid you will have to apply elsewhere," retorted Stuart shortly. "I see nothing unusual about the background or the people. It is true that Mrs. Daben has been greatly upset over the disappearance of the harp, for which none of us can offer an explanation. In my opinion, unnecessarily upset. If that harp ever had any real importance, it was very long ago and nowadays it is no more and no less valuable than any other museum piece. But she is high-strung and she—"

He caught himself up abruptly. "Frankly, I will not discuss her further. That is all I intend to say."

Discovering that this was the truth, Tarrant presently took his leave and spent the remainder of the sunny morning wandering about the hilltop outside. He met no one until lunchtime when the entire party gathered in the dining room.

It was during luncheon that Molla Daben proposed a canter for

the afternoon. "Sorry," said Daben, "but I have some work to be done and I shall want Stuart with me." Brinkerstall, apparently, did not ride.

"I will join you with pleasure, Mrs. Daben," Tarrant volunteered. "I'm fond of horses. If you'll let me substitute for the others?"

"Surely. The ridge extends about half a mile. I can't offer you much exercise, but a little, anyhow. And we have a pretty fair slide down the northern slope."

Stuart looked plainly disappointed, Brinkerstall grunted; he wondered whether Daben, also, were not concealing a slight disgruntlement. Interesting, if true, although he could not imagine the cause.

Out on the bridle paths there was not much chance for conversation until he made it, by dismounting where a meadow touched the edge of the hill, on the pretense of the view and a rest for his horse. With the bridle loosely looped over an arm he sat down on the long grass and the girl had no choice but to join him. She let her mount wander, told him to do the same.

Tarrant lost no time in generalities. "You will forgive my being personal," he began, "but you seem a new woman since the return of the harp."

She had been smiling but her face clouded instantly. "Oh, what can have happened to it? Of course it is vitally important to have it back again, but I don't understand even how that came about. And, so long as we don't know, it may happen again! I am not worried now as I was, naturally; but I have been half sick about it. Dr. Torpington—that's our physician—has been urging me to go on a cruise with him and his family, he said I must get away, and recover my health or I should have a complete breakdown. But of course I couldn't—I can't now, as long as this uncertainty continues."

"Ah," said Tarrant. "When does Dr. Torpington set sail?"

"In two weeks. No, about ten days now. But you must see it is impossible."

"Why, really, Mrs. Daben, I can't say that I do. Isn't it possible you are taking the whole matter far too seriously? After all, though it is disconcerting to lose such a valuable heirloom, it does not seem an especially dangerous experience. And it is back again, safe and sound."

"For the time being."

"Well, let us suppose the worst. Let us suppose that it vanishes again. If so, we should have some reason now, I think, to

expect another return. And how could that injure you?"

"Not me. Donatelli, Mr. Daben."

"You are thinking about that old prophecy of the harp's disappearing thrice?"

"Yes. Don't you see? If someone, *something*, can get into our locked library, to take the harp and bring it back, what measures or what vigilance can keep it from attacking my husband after a triple warning? I am Irish, Mr. Tarrant. Oh, I know the upper classes have never taken the banshees very seriously, but what *can* it be that is doing this?"

"My dear lady," said Tarrant soothingly, "there are no banshees. Whatever reality the 'mound people' ever had, ceased when belief in them ceased. You *are* overwrought about this, truly."

The girl looked at him. Her voice was nearly a wail as she cried, "But it's all my fault. Don't you know it's all my fault?"

"What?" For a moment Tarrant had a sudden suspicion that he was about to hear confession. Some plot to make use of the ancient legend for a modern purpose? Frederick?

She was speaking rapidly. "So he didn't tell you all of it? I thought you knew, but it's like him to leave this out. It's a code, part of his code. . . .

"I'll tell you. Way back, about 1156, there was a man Dermot, King of Leinster. He lost his throne and had to flee to Henry the Second for aid. Later he came back with Pembroke, Richard de Clare; and Henry himself came to Ireland soon after. It was the beginning of the Anglo-Norman invasion. I won't bother you with complicated politics but presently a betrothal was arranged, and a marriage followed, between Donatelli's great-great-great-great-grandfather, the head of the Daben line and custodian of the harp at that time, and Beren de Maleore or Malorye or Malloire—no one spelled the same then—who was a very important young Norman noblewoman. Of course it's forgotten now, but then it affected the destiny of both Ireland and England; the Irish *ardri*, the chief king, didn't have as much standing as the head of the house that had descended from the great Breogan, and possessed his harp to prove the succession.

"That was when the Norman soothsayers composed the prophecy, for the marriage celebration of Brian Dabheoin and Beren de Maleore. And of course it hinged on the harp which was the very symbol of the bargain. I can remember every word of it."

Tarrant said nothing and she went on, a low voice now, repeating the old words.

"Once but not twice Dabheoin and Malorye
May wed without danger of traveillie;
If again—the harpe in peril stande.
When Breogan Harpe thrice shall elude
The guardian that to harpe be trowed,
Then shall the race of Dabheoin eande."

Well, but that rhyme affects us. Donatelli is the present guardian of the harp. Beren de Malorye's younger brother also made an Irish marriage in 1172. And I am his direct descendant," finished the former Molla Mallory simply.

"But the relationship is far from close," was Tarrant's puzzled comment. "Or do you mean that you only discovered the prophecy after your marriage?"

"It is not a question of the degree of our relationship," explained Molla patiently. "The point is that this is the second time 'Dabheoin and Malorye have wed.' Oh, we knew about it; I knew and so did Donatelli. We thought—I don't know why I tell you all this, Mr. Tarrant, except that I must tell someone and I'm sure you are a gentleman, in the older sense. I may as well tell it all now. I won't pretend I have ever been fully in love with Donatelli; our marriage was made for—dynastic reasons. Not political, of course; we were the surviving heads of two old lines and, as such, he had inherited control of a considerable fortune, while mine is even larger. We wanted to perpetuate the lines, we wanted to unite the fortunes; in a democracy finance has taken over many of the prerogatives of aristocracy.

"We had both, we had the lineage and also the corresponding financial power. Please don't think it was a distasteful *marriage de convenance*. I have always liked Donatelli and admired him; I have reason to believe that, just as a man, he is very fond of me. And contrary to democratic dogma, I have always thought that a marriage based upon practical as well as emotional reasons is likely to turn out as good as any, if only for the fact that it is founded on two good grounds rather than merely one. . . . I am not defending our action, I am explaining it. But we thought the prophecy was just old words; we thought that in 1934 we could chance that part of it without much danger."

Tarrant said, "And you still think the bargain you made a good one?"

"My marriage? Yes, I do. I should do it over again. But the prophecy—"

"Is just old words, Mrs. Daben, I assure you."

"Oh, how can you say that? The harp has never been lost by the Daben line, never in combat, never by theft, *never!* And this *is* the second occurrence of just the marriage that was mentioned. How can you explain such a coincidence? What other explanation can there be?"

He had been racking his brains for an answer to that very question. Now he said slowly, "I can think of several. The Malorye family possessed political importance in the twelfth century, I take it. I doubt if the English, though willing to give away one of them for value received, looked with favor upon the emigration of any others. Common sense, Mrs. Daben, tells us that this rhyme was made for reasons that were cogent at the time of its composing; we must agree that there were no wizards at Henry's court capable of foreseeing the events of 1930."

"But then it would have been made against the Irish, not the Dabheoin family."

"And," Tarrant went on, struck by an idea, "I should make a shrewd guess that the prophecy was made for the very purpose of discouraging your own ancestor, Beren's brother, from adding to the Irish influence the Maloryes could wield in London. English influence in Ireland was one thing, Irish influence in England another."

"No," Molla Daben spoke with a hopeless conviction. "Beren's brother married an O'Neill, not a Dabheoin. . . . And common sense should go the whole way, not stop short in the middle. It tells me that no modern person stole Breogan's harp; no modern person could, as it is safeguarded. What kind of being, what sort of power, can pluck the harp from behind concrete walls through the door that I do not myself know how to open? Until that is explained, I am not likely to forget a prophecy that is already two-fifths verified. . . . Can you explain it—by common sense?"

Tarrant said, "No, Mrs. Daben, I cannot. Yet."

As he went up the broad staircase, still in his riding kit, Daben was coming down.

His host drew him to one side. "I hope you did not discuss the harp with Mrs. Daben this afternoon. I have been worried about her attitude towards the affair. Very worried."

"I'm afraid I mentioned it," Tarrant admitted. "I did my best to reassure her. I don't know how far I succeeded."

"Tsk!"

"And by the way, are you positive no one except yourself knows how to operate the library panel. We must get that straight. Is there any possibility?"

"There is," Daben assured him, "none at all. . . . I know."

Tarrant showered and changed with fair speed, but nonetheless, when he came down again, Molla Daben was already in the drawing room. The heavy rugs in the hall were responsible for the slight contretemps—if it was one—that marked his entrance, for they deadened his footsteps until he reached the doorway.

Across the room Brinkerstall was talking to the girl, seriously. His voice, raised in emphasis, carried plainly. "Molla, it is not necessary. I am opposed to it absolutely. If you do go, there is no reason at all to execute—" He caught sight of Tarrant and stopped abruptly.

The latter said at once, "I'm afraid I'm interrupting you people. Sorry. I'll take a turn—"

"Not a bit of it," Molla Daben smiled across to him. "I'm glad you rescued me. It's just something about finances; Snooky is still the heavy guardian, so zealous. . . . Come over here, Mr. Tarrant, and I'll show you how to mix a brand new cocktail."

Tarrant came over, grinning inwardly. "Snooky"; what a name for a dignified John Brinkerstall, Esq.! Still, a girl as pretty as Molla could probably make 'em like whatever tags she picked. He had a distinct impression that the financier was hrmp-hrmping a very flattered disapproval.

The others came in while Tarrant was still vigorously jingling the ice in the shaker. No doubt it was John's day off. The dinner that followed was a repetition of that of the previous evening; and afterwards the game of contract was reconstituted. Although no special orders had been given this time, they found the table again set up in the great hall.

Molla remarked, "I must tell them we don't want to play here every evening. But we may as well not move now." It was a decision that Tarrant was later to find a fortunate one.

Just as they were sitting down Daben came out of the library, another boat under his arm. This time it was a Far Eastern craft, a long war canoe of some kind with a single mast. As he passed the table, Tarrant called casually, "All quiet in the fortress?"

"How? . . . Oh, I see. Yes, the harp is there, all right. When I was looking at it just now, I could scarcely believe it had ever been

away. It really *can't* be gotten out of that room." He passed on his way up the staircase.

The card play seemed to Tarrant rather ragged that evening. He cut with Brinkerstall, then cut with him again. That left Stuart with Molla and, although the stakes were small enough, the secretary seemed to have been seized with an intense desire to win. Against Brinkerstall, who placed every card in the pack with uncanny accuracy, it led to disaster. Molla let him down once with an unjustified redouble, but for the most part it was the other way around. Pressing can do as much damage to a hand of contract as to a drive from the tee; and Stuart pressed. The previous evening, when he had had Tarrant for a partner, he had played a sound conservative game. Tarrant noted the difference silently and filed it away, first in his memory, later in his notebook.

It was all of one o'clock when the debacle had been completed. Molla and Stuart were off nine thousand points, forty-five dollars. They settled immediately, Molla with a check, the secretary from a roll of bills he produced from a pocket. It was Tarrant who received the check and, as he folded it away, saw with surprise that his hostess dealt with the same New York bank that had his own account.

Stuart was saying ruefully, looking up at Daben who had returned and had stood watching the play for the past half hour, "I let her down pretty badly. Though I guess she can stand it better than I can. If I do this often, I shall have to have a raise in salary."

Daben laughed. "In that case I shall play more frequently myself. Against you. I haven't any objection to paying you fifty dollars each morning, provided I win it back again the same night." He turned to Tarrant. "I suppose," he said, half-seriously, "there has been no disturbance from the library while I was up in my workshop."

"I can guarantee that the room has remained closed." The other spoke lightly, leaning back and stretching out his long legs beside the table. "We cut to keep seats and partners. I have been facing the door the entire evening."

"Let's look," Molla proposed suddenly, getting up from her chair so that the men had to come to their feet also. She smiled as she said it, in no way nervously; despite her protests Tarrant's talk of the afternoon seemed to have confirmed return of her spirits.

"Don't be silly, darling," her husband spoke. "If Mr. Tarrant has had his eye on the door all the time, nothing can have happened."

"Oh, well, let's anyhow. We can sleep better after seeing it. I know I can."

Daben shrugged, then yielded gracefully. "I can't imagine anything more foolish, but very well." He led the way down the hall, followed by all except Brinkerstall who lingered to light a cigar. His hands, as they swept over the paneling, were deft and too swift to disclose just what he did. The door hummed open and he pressed the light switch beside it.

"Oh!" cried Molla. "Oh." The cabinet was plainly empty, the harp had vanished! The color drained out of the girl's face, leaving it dead white, and Tarrant put out an arm to steady her as she swayed beside him.

His own expression was surprised, almost incredulous. "Don't go in there, anybody! I think," he added quietly, "that I shall spend another half hour here. Alone."

As the door closed, shutting him in, his notebook was already half out of his pocket. First he went to his knees, squinting along the thick pile of the rug; but it was resilient and, if any tracks had been made since Daben's visit just after dinner, they had time to disappear.

He went about his task methodically. "First row, south—Encyclopedia Britannica, 14th Edition, check; Dictionary of Famous Men, check; Second row—Works of Bulwer, Lord Lytton, check . . . check . . . check . . ." He continued about the room, noting the position of each piece of furniture, as recorded in the notebook. The eighteen boats; yes, they were there on the cornice. Everything, in fact, was exactly as it had been on his other visit, with the exception of the relic in the center of the room. He climbed onto one of the ladders, climbed off again.

He approached the cabinet, producing from his coat a small can no larger than those that hold shaving powder. He smiled as he dusted the tiny grey grains over the metal framework and over the glass sides and top of the harp's resting-place. He did use part of a regular detective's equipment, but beyond the fingerprint powder and an automatic it would have been hard to find among his possessions those numerous and intricate gadgets he was always reading about.

As he continued his careful dusting he reflected that they had all been under his observation when this had happened. Even Daben himself, for all practical purposes, since he had certainly not

entered the library. The obvious conclusion was that someone else, someone outside the small party he had met, must have gained access to the room by another means than the door. The servants? But there was no other entrance, that was the rub.

Now he leaned over and blew at the powder, gently. Of course, if Daben's prints were there, they would be there rightfully, although it was doubtful if he had unlocked the cabinet since Tarrant had wiped it clear. But if anyone else's stood out, he would know who the thief was, no matter how mysterious the thief's coming and going remained. With an amateur it was always likely that fingerprints would be overlooked.

He finished blowing and stood looking down at the cabinet. There was not a print, not a smudge, not a mark of any kind on it.

"Now that," he murmured, "is either clever . . . or it is very damned queer."

Daben let him out and sat down beside the deserted bridge table, on whose top he commenced to drum nervously. He said, "They've gone to bed. Molla's very upset; she's had a regular relapse and Torpington's up with her now. What the devil could you make out of it, Tarrant? From the doorway the place looked exactly as I had left it when I came out after dinner."

"Yes," agreed Tarrant. He spoke rather absently. "It was just the same. Everything, except your harp. . . . That's the trouble. . . ." The silence continued until finally he added, "There were no fingerprints on the cabinet."

"Was the cabinet closed? I thought so, from the glimpse I had."

"I don't know whether it was or not. I don't know how you lock it."

"It locks automatically when it is closed. Unless it was open, it was locked."

"It certainly wasn't open. Therefore it must have been locked."

Daben barked a short nervous laugh. "I'm a superstitious man. I hope I'm not. But the room was locked and closed, and you yourself could see the only door all the time. The cabinet was locked. We went in and the cabinet was still locked. I gather that you found no signs of any tampering at all. And yet the harp is gone. Long ago there were powers in Ireland; and their fame still lingers in banshee legends—"

Tarrant said wearily, "Need I remind you that the *ban sith*, 'the woman of the fairies,' the banshee if you like, was never a harp-

thief? It was her keening in the night that announced an impending death among those she visited. There has been no mention of keening, nor have I heard any."

"No-o," said Daben uncertainly.

The hall was high; with only the two bridge lamps and the dying fire for light, the beams above looked distant and shadowy. Tarrant's host gave a slight start as a log collapsed in the carved fireplace behind him. Tarrant blew a thin spiral of cigarette smoke towards the dimness over their heads.

He said ruminatively, "In the old days, I believe, only families of pure Milesian descent were ever attended by a banshee. That was one of the privileges Brian Dabheoin lost when he married Beren de Malorye. No doubt we should have agreed with his choice."

The other looked up. "I see that Mrs. Daben has been telling you about Brian and Beren de Malorye. I'm sorry you discussed it with her. She works herself up into an absurd belief that she is somehow responsible for this trouble. I had rather she didn't even think about it."

"But of course that is scarcely possible. She is as concerned about her own heritage and its responsibilities as you are about yours."

"I suppose so. Yes, of course, you're right. I am reluctant to connect these disappearances with our old prophecy but can there be a more 'ordinary' explanation?"

Tarrant nodded slightly, looking over at his companion. "Yes," he said, "there can."

"What! Do you, can you—"

"Oh, just an idea, nothing more as yet. I shouldn't think of sketching it out for you until I have some more tangible evidence."

"And you say your solution is straightforward, commonplace?"

"My dear man, it is not a solution now; when it becomes one, there will be evidence to support it. And I haven't any evidence yet. . . . You must be prepared for a shock, Daben. I still hold to my *carte blanche*."

"Naturally," said the other a little stiffly. "It was in our bargain. I do not intend to back down. But how can you dismiss—"

"I do not," Tarrant pointed out, "invent solutions, I discover them. It is not my fault that they usually turn out to be what you would call 'ordinary.' If I succeed here, I venture to say that there will be no ghosts, or banshees, involved. And by the way, I must get back to New York for a day or so."

"What, you mean on this matter? But it takes place here. Surely

there will be no clue in New York to a mystery in Hartford."

"There are other matters that demand my attention," Tarrant returned vaguely. "I came up with you a bit unexpectedly. Of course I may find an opportunity to check one or two details on your affair. I'd not be surprised to find relevant details in New York. I'll be back, say, within three days. I have a notion to go down with Brinkerstall; I think he leaves tomorrow."

His host appeared somewhat doubtful. "Well, of course, just as you say. I'd rather you stayed here for the time being. But very well. . . . It's late, you know. Shall we go on up?" He rose to his feet and pulled an enormous fender across the fireplace.

"You go ahead," Tarrant adjured him. "I shall stay a few minutes and smoke another cigarette. There are a few things I want to get straight in my mind. No, really, don't wait for me."

Daben hesitated, then saw the other did not mind his leaving. "All right. Goodnight, then. I'll see you in the morning before you leave." He mounted the stairs and disappeared in the corridor above.

Tarrant got up, took another, more comfortable chair, and prepared to wait. The silence in the house had deepened; it was so still that he could distinguish a kind of undertone, a steady, nearly imperceptible throbbing. That must be the air-conditioning system. He lit a cigarette.

There was another sound, too, almost as low as the whisper from the ventilators. It was so regular that for some time Tarrant did not recognize it. Then, when he did, he jumped out of his chair and looked searchingly around the dim reaches of the hall. Yes, far up in the shadows near the main entrance, a man sprawled in a big davenport.

Tarrant tiptoed across the rugs until he stood beside him. He listened intently; to all appearances the man was sound asleep. Tarrant reached out and shook him gently.

John Brinkerstall stirred. "Ugh. Agh." He shook himself awake. "Uh, Tarrant, uh. I sat down to finish my cigar. Must have fallen asleep. What time is it?"

"About two thirty." Tarrant observed the half-burned cigar in the other's fingers, the ash droppings on the floor below his knee.

"I must get to bed. I can't imagine how I did it."

"I'm going back to New York tomorrow, for a day or so. I thought we might take the same train, if you won't mind the company. There are some questions I would like to put to you."

Brinkerstall cleared his throat. "I'll be glad of your company. As

to the questions—hrmp—we'll see. Goodnight, Tarrant." He followed Daben, lumbering up the stairs. As he turned at the top, a small man, dapper and quick, passed him on the way down.

Tarrant stepped forward and accosted the newcomer. "You're Dr. Torpington? I've been waiting to see you. How is your patient?"

"Good as can be expected. Shock, worry. May I ask who you are, sir?"

Tarrant made haste to explain his identity and his presence in the house. "I know it's late, I'll only keep you a moment. Mrs. Daben's, ah, illness is entirely due to the matter of the harp?"

"Harp, harp," snapped the doctor. "No doubt. Illness due to worry that upsets central nervous system; disturbance jangles down through the sympathetic and affects all the ordinary functions. Digestion, elimination, bad upset. Reciprocal action back on the sympathetic. Of course. Get away from the harp. New faces, new scenes. Another relapse like this and I shall insist on it. Insist."

"When do you leave on your cruise, doctor?"

"Next week. Friday, next week."

"But can she go? Her accommodations, on a cruise, at the last moment—"

"Spoke to Daben long ago. Authorized me get her accommodations if warranted in my judgment. Have 'em. Have everything except her consent."

"And can you get that?"

Dr. Torpington stared at him. "Certainly. If necessary. My patient. Insist."

"Of course the harp is back of it all," Tarrant observed. "What is your opinion about the harp?"

"Don't know the details. Don't want to. Some folderol about curse or prophecy or something. That's the stimulus but it's gone beyond stimulus now. Completely run down. I'm responsible for my patient's health. Get away, get health back, then she can come home and face her problem with resource. No organic trouble, purely functional."

"And are you going to insist, Dr. Torpington?"

"If she improves, I can't. If she gets another shock, insist. Told Daben so just now. Must be getting along."

"Just a minute." Tarrant walked over to the card table, tore off a blank score and began to write. "Maybe I can reassure your patient somewhat. Will you give her this note when you stop to see her tomorrow? I won't be here," he explained.

The doctor looked rather surprised. "Certainly. If it's all right. Have to read it myself."

Tarrant folded the paper, extended it. Torpington took it, and read:

"Mrs. Daben.—I must be away for the next two days. Please accept my assurance that the harp will have returned by the time I do.

"TREVIS TARRANT."

"Know what you're talking about?" the doctor demanded. Tarrant smiled. "Usually," he admitted.

This time he was right, at any rate. When he got back, driving out from Hartford in the Rolls through afternoon flurries of snow, the harp's return was the first news with which Daben greeted him in the great hallway.

Tarrant had had a busy two days. The trip down to New York had been taken up with adroit questioning of Brinkerstall. Most of the questions the financier had answered, though not all of them. He had, however, evaded rather than flatly refused on those occasions. He would not commit himself to the amount of the combined fortunes of Daben and Molla, maintaining that he was not familiar with the former's affairs, and Tarrant did not press him as to the extent of the wife's means. Brinkerstall believed that in case anything happened to Daben, he had left everything to his wife; he knew this to be true vice versa.

"See here, young man," he had interjected at this point, "these are serious questions. You don't think anything might happen to Daben, do you?"

"I should not be entirely surprised if something happened to him."

"Nonsense—hrmp—nonsense." The other's tone had been half-way between a snort and a chuckle. "I never heard such absurd gravity over a piece of paper written by medieval dunces. I don't know what monkeyshines are going on with that old stick of a harp, but no one has been hurt, or is going to be."

In view of the conference in the drawing room that he had inadvertently interrupted, Tarrant wanted to reassure himself that Molla's money was still safe despite the Depression and the financier assured him that this was emphatically the case. It was just

because her investments were so sound that her adviser had been urging upon her a course which he went on to explain could only be to her advantage. Tarrant admitted the incorrectness of his first conclusion. Nevertheless, when he left his companion at Grand Central, he felt well satisfied with the outcome of the trip. Even more so, perhaps, because of what Brinkerstall had *not* said.

He had visited his banker and broker—he really had private business in town—from both of whom he had made discreet inquiries. He had found out little from either, although the wealth of the Dabens naturally put them in the position of being subject to the continual rumors that waft about Wall Street. What little he did discover, however, was acceptable. He had also spent an hour with a certain wholesale supply house that dealt in everything from chemical supplies to hospital equipment. Then, feeling that he had done everything he could, he took a train back to Hartford.

On the journey there had been time for reflection. Among other things he had noted down the following table:

OCCASION	TIME	PRESENT
First disappearance	Night	Daben, Molla Daben, Stuart, Torpington
First reappearance	Aft'noon (?)	Molla Daben, Stuart, Brinkerstall
Second disappearance	Night	Daben, Molla Daben, Stuart, Brinkerstall

He had considered the listing for a time, then turned back through the pages of his notes. Torpington's attitude regarding his patient, his preparedness to take her away with him; well, that fitted. Stuart had played very bad bridge the evening of the second disappearance. And that conversation between Molla and Stuart overheard in the corridor upstairs. Of course, there was a real controversy about the girl's going away; could it be that the speeches he had heard were far more innocent than they appeared, were really no more than the secretary's appeal to Molla to be sensible and to take the trip for her health? Were Molla and Stuart in love with each other, that was the question. He recalled Molla's assurance that she would repeat her marriage, he recalled her "dynastic" reasons. She had been sincere about both these matters, he felt sure; but were they quite the same? He glanced through his notes again and smiled openly as the answer to his question stood plainly before him.

He had closed the notebook with a snap just as the train ground into the Hartford station.

Now he stood talking with Daben.

"I rather thought your relic would precede me," he acknowledged. "However, I am glad it has. Oh, before I forget it: Brinkerstall asked me to tell you he'll be up again tomorrow. No, just overnight. There's some further business he has to take up with Mrs. Daben and he wants to see her personally rather than writing. She is better than when I left, I trust?"

"Well, better, yes. Not herself though, by any means. . . . We shall be quite a party tomorrow evening. Dr. Torpington and his wife are coming for dinner and will spend the night. They're great contract players; it's quite a fixture. I do hope nothing further happens to disturb Molla."

"I am rather afraid," said Tarrant slowly, "that it will."

"My God, man! You mean you expect Breogan's harp to vanish for the *third* time?"

"Just that."

"But we can't allow that to happen. I shall post guards in the hall!"

"I was on guard in your hall myself last time. It didn't seem to help much. . . . No, here is what I suggest. I propose to spend the next few nights in your library, inside instead of outside. It has always disappeared at night, hasn't it?"

"It returned in the daytime yesterday; some time between noon and six P.M. But it has always disappeared at night. If you are going to do that, I shall keep you company. God knows what happens, but whatever it is, we shall take it on together."

"I'd rather be alone," said Tarrant. "Really."

"No, no. I wouldn't think of it. It is my difficulty, my place is there with you."

Tarrant capitulated. "As you will. All right. Let us begin with tonight."

But though they did, nothing occurred. In the closed and quiet library Tarrant spent the long hours in reading composedly. Daben for the most part paced up and down, back and forth around the cabinet where the harp lay motionless and undisturbed under the glowing lights. At seven they emerged and breakfasted. And went wearily up the stairs to bed.

It was late in the afternoon when Tarrant descended, to find his

fellow guests gathered in the drawing room at tea. Everyone was present. Daben and Molla and Stuart, of course; also Brinkerstall, who greeted him cordially. Dr. Torpington and his wife sat together beyond the tea table. She was a large woman, a nondescript blonde, her hair just a little straggly around the edges; a motherly type of person whose chief characteristic, one could tell at a glance, was placidity. Tarrant, watching them as tea progressed, felt convinced that the doctor, staccato and dapper, was her actual slave, little as he might sometimes suspect it. At other times no doubt he not only suspected it but loved it.

After dinner Tarrant drew his host to one side. "You have your guests," he pointed out. "And I've no objection to doing the vigil alone; in fact, I prefer it. I've had enough bridge for the time being. So if you will let me into the library in a few minutes, I'll begin."

"I don't know," Daben began doubtfully. Molla and Stuart were passing and he detained them to explain the proposal. "If I'm not there, how will you get out, if you should want to?" he asked Tarrant.

"But I don't want to. If you will come for me at seven or seven thirty, that will be all that's necessary."

Daben still hesitated. "I would really rather not disclose the mechanism, even to you. But perhaps under the circum—"

"Not at all. It is quite unnecessary. Nothing would persuade me to leave, were the door wide open. I am quite serious."

"Oh, please be careful, Mr. Tarrant," Molla begged him. "I know you won't believe the prophecy has anything to do with it. But how can you tell?" She was pale and uncomfortable beneath her role of hostess and it was plain for a moment what effort it cost her to play it.

Her husband strove to combat her anxiety. "Nothing at all happened last night," he remarked. "I don't believe that anything will, so long as one of us is there." He came to a decision quickly, possibly for Molla's benefit. "All right, Tarrant, we shall do as you say. I'll let you in now."

"Just a minute. I have a portfolio upstairs that I shall want. Might as well get a little of my own work done during the night." Not very much more than a minute later he met Daben before the library door and was admitted. There was a slight clink as he dropped the portfolio casually upon an easy chair but by that time the door had closed again and he was alone.

His first concern was to check the inventory he had made on his first visit to the room; more or less familiar with it by now, he

completed the checking well within fifteen minutes. On the present occasion everything, he found, was accounted for, including the harp reposing innocently on its cushion. As he closed his notebook and put it away he experienced the strangest conviction that at some time during the coming night the harp would vanish for the third time.

Of course, that was what he was counting on; it would be strictly in accord with his deductions. But the feeling he had was not logical, it was not the conclusion of a syllogism, it was an immediacy of emotional perception as distinct as a visual or tactile one. Everything about the room was the same as always, *except the room itself*. His impression, queer, and for a minute or so overwhelming, was that the room was shocked; it was the room as a whole, the room as an entity, that was talking to him. And what it said, very definitely, was that what had gone before had been minor, in a way harmless, but that what it now foresaw and was bracing itself to witness would be dangerous. Very dangerous and very evil.

Tarrant gave himself a tentative shake and murmured, "Bosh." Rooms do not talk to one, assuredly they do not share their apprehensions as to the future with those who chance to sit down in them. He recalled the unctuousness with which sentimental lady novelists endowed rooms, and even pieces of furniture, with personalities, making them whisper their reminiscences of dead romances and dead crimes and dead this and that. It was anthropomorphism with a vengeance. No, rooms were rooms; they might be the scenes of all sorts of things, but unless definite clues were left behind, they told no tales. It was on quite other grounds that he expected the harp to vanish tonight. There would be a certain amount of danger naturally.

On an impulse he opened his portfolio and spread out its contents for a final check. He might have neglected something on that hurried visit to his apartments, or something might have been tampered with.

The objects he placed under the light on the desk were curious. There were two sealed cans, not large but rather heavy. There was something that looked a little like a money belt, very thin and very strong and hard to the touch; it ended in a pair of tapes, now untied. The next object resembled a football player's noseguard. A high-powered electric torch and a loaded automatic completed the equipment.

Those were his weapons, both of defense and offense. Upon those

few diverse particulars he would have to rely not only for a solution of the mystery of the harp that vanished; quite possibly he would have to rely upon them for his own life. He checked them over carefully, and found them properly ready. "Gadgets," smiled Tarrant as he put them away again.

He looked at his watch. Ten o'clock. He took from the portfolio its single other burden, a book—*Emotions of Normal People*, W.M. Marston, Harcourt Brace & Company. Someone had called it to his attention the week before; it spoke well of his nerves that he could give himself up to its complexities at the present moment. He opened it at the beginning and became absorbed in the text. He was still reading it, carefully and attentively, at one o'clock when the library door hummed open and Daben stood on the threshold.

"I thought I'd look in," Daben said, "and see how you were making out. I cut out this rubber but it's the last thing they're going to play. An early evening. They want to get to bed because of that show at the country club tomorrow morning."

"Ah. I didn't know about that."

"Yes. A horse show. Late in the season, but it's the first one out here and they couldn't get a better date. . . ." Daben paused, then went on, "You know, old man, I'd forgotten all about this show, but I really ought to put in an appearance. Two of Molla's horses in the morning. I'd rather meant to keep you company, but I think, if you don't mind, I'll turn in. After last night I have no doubt nothing will happen here. . . . Sure you won't call it off yourself?"

"No, I'll stick. I have, well, call it a hunch, that the harp will disappear again tonight." He looked meaningly at Daben. "You might watch yourself tonight, here or anywhere else. Lock your door."

The other laughed. "I? Lock my door? Come on, you're taking this more seriously than I am. You'll be as bad as Molla presently. We spent the whole night in here last evening and nothing happened at all. We might better have been in our beds. Nothing will happen; it's hopeless to attack it this way."

"And don't unlock it till morning," said Tarrant quietly. "Maybe—I'm not sure—but maybe nothing will happen then."

Daben said: "I don't know what you're talking about. But I'm going to bed. I'd really rather you gave it up this time. . . . Well, goodnight. And good hunting: I'll come for you by seven thirty."

"Goodnight."

The door closed, with a click of finality. Tarrant shrugged, sat staring at it for some little time. Unless someone else had discov-

ered his host's secrets, that was the last human face he would see, the last voice he would hear and the last chance of escape he would possess until after the attempt—the danger—had come and passed. He was alone, as securely shut away as if prisoned in a bank vault with the time lock set for seven thirty A.M.

He smiled, a bit grimly. Yes, in many respects the room was like a bank vault. He really had not discovered how the one door was opened either from the inside or from without. For that omission he had had his reasons. It would be amusing if this room came to resemble a bank vault in *all* respects.

For the best part of half an hour he sat considering the situation; and toward the end of it a little doubt, that grew, began edging its way into his mind. It was dead quiet, just that tiny whisper of the ventilators that he had noticed for the first time out in the entrance hall a number of nights before.

What if he were wrong? There were a lot of unconfirmed steps in the process by which he had come to the conclusion on which he was now staking his success. It was a surprising conclusion and he had to admit that it was based on something uncomfortably like surmise. His deductions only differed from surmise in the strict and rigid logic by which one proceeded from another. Well, that was what he believed in, that was the way Causation worked and the sure way in which it could be understood—sometimes anticipated. It had never failed him yet.

Still—There were too many factors missing for certainty. It was scarcely a week since he had first heard the Legend of the Harp and there might be a score of factors unknown to him, maybe merely because no one had chanced to mention them as yet. Any one of these unknowns might conceivably invalidate the train of reasoning that had set the present stage. He had planned against a definite form of procedure, a definite kind of attack, by putting himself in his theoretical adversary's place. But facts remained the same whether they were taken into consideration or not; what if some fact had escaped inclusion in his reasoning and the attack, when it came, arose from an unexpected quarter, one against which he had failed to guard?

Curiously enough, although he was doubting his own concrete predictions, he felt strangely certain that this night the harp would vanish again. That conviction seemed to come, not from logic, but from some other vague region of perception. Could there, coldly considered, be anything in the old tales that clustered about the relic? There, before his eyes, lay the harp. It, at any rate, had

spanned some thousands of years, to be present in physical actuality in this room. . . . Banshees, of course, were out; the entire situation was outside that tradition. But who had been the "mound people"? Of all legendary beings they were the vaguest; their reports had come down far more fragmentarily than those of Horus or Set or the gods of the Aztecs. Who really knew anything about them, or about what they were once believed to have been? The *ban sith* was one of them, yes; but what other creatures had they comprised, with what other different attributes?

He glanced at his watch, shook himself back out the dim past of Ireland. A stray thought lingered before fading; the remarkable tie-up, through the harp, with Egypt. There if anywhere in the old times had been real knowledge rather than priestly superstition. . . . One thirty-five. . . . More than one threat out of the ancient world he had investigated, more than one legendary menace before which very modern people had trembled. All of those threats had been empty. And at the back of his head wandered a peculiar impression about this one.

He went back to his book. If he were right in his view of this case, he knew what to expect; and there would be warning of a kind he couldn't miss. If not, he might as well be engaging his attention upon something important as fussing about the unknown. He had reached a point in the volume where a preliminary discussion of the appetitive type was undertaken.

This type of personality, the text stated, was one in which the love response mechanisms of the higher centers were subordinated to the self-seeking mechanism originally based upon hunger drive. The love mechanisms were responsible not only for what was generally considered love behavior but also for those forms of response upon which social intercourse and fair dealing with one's fellow men were founded. Thus the criminal was the example *par excellence* of the appetitive personality type. And when the correlation centers of the head brain (whose operation determined mental functioning) were highly organized, this meant that the criminal person, in his or her activities, could draw upon much imagination and ingenuity. Such a person would employ deceit to unexpected lengths, even continuing a role of innocence when alone and unobserved—

It was just one forty-four when the library was plunged abruptly into darkness.

Tarrant closed his book, switched on his flashlight, and looked

at the time. He was not disturbed; this was what he had expected. It was confirmation of sorts; but it was nothing he could rely upon. The next move might still be quite outside his calculations.

There was absolute silence now, not a sound of any kind. He played the light around the room from his position at the desk; its bright beam threw the lined books, the ships, and the chairs into sharp relief and made the library look longer and narrower than it was. Also larger; he realized, making the necessary corrections for the perspectives revealed by the flash, that the room was really rather small.

For more than an hour he sat thus, sometimes in darkness, sometimes throwing the light about the room. Nothing happened. Always he strained his ears for the slightest noise. There was no sound at all, there was no movement of any kind in the chamber. Only time, with its silent regularity, flowed through the room.

Suddenly he realized that he was getting drowsy; he had actually been nodding when he caught himself. He sat up and pinched his leg, gave a prodigious yawn, and pressed the flashlight. Nothing had moved, everything was the same, the harp lay in the cabinet untouched. He was frightfully sleepy. He yawned again.

The next time Tarrant lit the torch he was so dizzy that the wall at the library's end played tricks of receding, then advancing again in the wavering glare. It was four twenty-six. . . . And there was a low humming somewhere. Groggily he reached for the automatic and nearly dropped it. Then he was covering the door. A moment later he had dropped the gun into his pocket and was resting his head on his hands. He had realized that the humming came from no part of the room; it was the blood pounding in his own ears that he heard.

He staggered to his feet and stumbled across the floor, noting painfully as he passed that the relic in the cabinet was still undisturbed. Three times he gasped out Daben's name as loudly as he could, and was beating with his fists on the panel he did not know how to open. The blows were feeble; he wondered if they could be heard even by anyone in the hall outside.

He swayed once. He swayed again and fell backwards in a sprawled, untidy heap to the right of the closed doorway.

The lights came on at five fifteen.

But there was no movement in the room. None from the door, none about the walls, or floor, or ceiling. None from the quiet figure lying beside the entrance. It was five thirty-five before the prelim-

inary buzz announced the opening of the panel doorway.

A figure stood there, muffled in a robe; stood for some seconds sniffing, then slipped through as the panel swung shut. It bent over Tarrant, felt for his heart; felt stillness.

The figure nodded to itself and made straightway for the cabinet. Presently that was open and the harp was lifted out. The cabinet was closed again. The figure went then about its further business.

Later it crossed the room, stopping once more beside Tarrant's body, just to make sure.

The panel swung open, the figure passed through, the panel swung shut.

The lights burned down into the library; and there was no movement of any kind.

At seven twenty-five the doorway hummed again and Daben walked through without hesitation. He looked in bewilderment at the empty desk and the empty chairs. It was a matter of seconds before his glance fell upon the man almost at his feet.

"Tarrant!" he cried. He, too, knelt down and felt for his guest's heart.

"My God!" gasped Daben. He stood uncertainly, and hesitated. Then the patter of his feet sped through the open entrance and down the great hall. As he ran up the stairs his shout came dwindling back. "Torpington! . . . Torpington! . . ."

The footsteps were coming back. They jarred down the velour-covered stairs, clattered across a bare spot on the flooring of the hall.

The two men turned into the library. They found themselves covered by a very steady automatic. From the seat behind the desk Tarrant spoke in a grimly level voice.

"Come in. And leave that door open."

The amazement on the two faces was surely sincere. Torpington plainly could make nothing of his sudden experience and Daben, if anything, was even more greatly astonished. But then, Daben had seen Tarrant's lifeless body only a few minutes before.

"I—but—" he stuttered. "You—I—What are you threatening us for?"

"I am not necessarily threatening you," Tarrant returned. "But it has been an eventful night. There has been, among other things, an attempted murder. And you will notice that the harp has gone."

Daben stared at the empty cabinet, his face paling to a sickly white.

"I intend," continued Tarrant, "to settle this whole matter here and now. By force, if necessary. You will summon the rest of your party, Mr. Daben. And you, Dr. Torpington, will stand by that door and see that it does not close."

"But I— But you can't do that. You will give everyone a frightful turn. Mrs. Daben—no, I won't have her shocked this way!" Under the force of his protest the host's color returned to his cheeks.

Tarrant did not raise his voice. "I am perfectly capable of calling the police. I shall do so within ten minutes. Unless my demands are followed immediately."

"But the scandal, the notoriety—"

"Make up your mind!" snapped Tarrant, rising from his chair. The automatic did not move at all.

That did it. Daben, still protesting futilely, made a reluctant exit to arouse the others and Tarrant took a place close to Torpington beside the door to await their arrival. "You need not summon Mrs. Torpington," he called as an afterthought to the departing man. "Everybody else. And don't delay too long."

They arrived separately, Molla Daben surprisingly first of all. She had not dressed but had thrown a tea gown over her nightdress and slipped her feet into a pair of mules. It is remarkable what different effects feminine attire produce; in riding habit she had looked a robust, hearty young woman; now she appeared fragile and astonishingly dainty.

Evidently she had not been apprised of many details, for when she saw the cabinet empty of its treasure she gasped and clutched the tea gown instinctively to her throat.

"Oh," she moaned. "It's gone; it's gone for the third time."

"Come over here, Mrs. Daben." Tarrant put her in one of the large chairs and, standing so he could continue to observe Torpington, addressed her steadily. "Your husband is not the only one in this house whose ancestry is long and honorable. Your own line, unless I am mistaken, bears the same distinctions. You talk about our modern democracy, you look down upon it, and in many fundamentals I agree with you.

"You are going to face a series of shocks in this room," he continued, "and you are going to face them very soon. The first shock will not be the end of them and the final one will be as severe as any that life will ever give you. One of your party is a criminal; and there is no one here to whom you are not bound by ties of affection and loyalty. Also, when I say one of this party is a criminal—" he gave her a direct and searching glance—"I include you

in the party. . . . Let us see if you can take this crisis as a Malorye should."

With careful accuracy he had selected the one appeal to pull the girl together. Why had he done it, he wondered fleetingly; because she was lovely, because she was highly-bred, because her femininity seemed defenseless and appealing in contrast to her masculine companions?

She flushed a little under his gaze. She spoke in that low, clear voice, firmly. "Whatever is coming, I shall take."

While he had been talking to her, the others had arrived. An occasional "hrmp" evidenced Brinkerstall's position at one side of the room against the bookshelves; his eyes were protruding slightly, giving him a somewhat froggy appearance. Stuart had drawn a chair to the vicinity of his employer's wife; Torpington still stood in the doorway.

"You are the master of this house, Mr. Daben," Tarrant said abruptly. "You will sit at the desk, if you please. Torpington, take a chair if you wish to. I shall stay at the door myself."

"Now," he went on, when these instructions had been complied with, "you all know the general outlines of what I intend to call the episode of Daben's harp. It is a relic of very great value, of which he is the legitimate custodian, and it has recently suffered a series of inexplicable disappearances. There is an ancient rune or prophecy that appears to have foretold these occurrences and even to include a threat against his safety."

"When the matter was brought to me, I came up here to investigate, as I think all of you have been well aware. I do not happen to believe in the efficacy of thousand-year-old threats; but I can easily understand someone unearthing them and using them to his or her own advantage. That is exactly what has been done. One of you, in this room now, had employed the Norman prophecy as a cover under which to gain criminal ends, and has not scrupled to plan a murder when the opportunity arose. That person, together with the details of the plot, is going to be disclosed and is going to pay the just penalty."

He paused and let the silence endure. They were all looking at him and at the automatic in his hand. Observation could pick out no guilty expression.

Tarrant's words came again. "The harp disappeared for the second time while I was here. I knew then, or immediately afterwards, what happened to it and who was engineering the disappearances."

But I did not then know why. I hinted my discoveries rather broadly and set about seeking the motive. I had to go down to New York at that time on business of my own, but when I returned I deliberately put myself into the criminal's hands. I intended that to be thought and it was thought. I knew that the first night thereafter that I spent in this room alone I would be attacked. The opportunity not only to make the harp vanish but to leave behind a dead body as evidence of the threat's power was too good to be missed."

Brinkerstall cleared his throat loudly. "How could you be attacked, sir, if you were here alone?"

"Oh, not directly. How would *you* attack a man in this room? That is what I put to myself. There is a simple and certain way, one that leaves no traces because it does not necessitate the criminal's presence. It is only required, when the whole household is in bed and asleep, to pull the main switch controlling the house current. That shuts off the light—and the air-conditioning system, too. There are no windows or other openings here; the place is a sealed box. Sooner or later, when the air in the room and that in the small flues leading to it is exhausted, suffocation is inevitable. This happens to be a system in which the blowers operate like valves, making a little rumbling and whispering when they are on. . . . I think there is no one present who has not known that I, in fact purposely, remained in ignorance of how to effect an exit from the library.

"But I had no intention of dying so meekly, obviously. I provided myself with the essential safeguards—two small cans of oxygen sealed under high pressure, and an inhalator in the convenient form of a noseguard with a heavy valve attachment for feeding small quantities from the cans. I went through the expected maneuvers of calling out in a strangled voice and beating not too strongly on the door, in case the criminal waited outside to observe his success. And I took the precaution of tying around my body and over my heart a tight band of material through which it would not be possible to feel any heartbeat when the criminal came in later to accomplish the rest of the task. For of course the harp had to vanish also."

"I see it has," said Dr. Torpington calmly. "Where has it been taken?"

"It has not been taken anywhere. It is right here in the library." Tarrant watched their glances go to the cabinet, then around the room. But no one saw the harp.

"Stuart," he said, "you have never, I believe, thought highly of the harp's own powers. Neither have I. You may bring it down. It is at the top of the ladder beside Brinkerstall."

The secretary, as if in a daze, got up and mounted the ladder. At the top he stood stupidly, his head just above the cornice.

"The boat," Tarrant cried. "That long war canoe with the single mast right in front of your nose!"

Stuart grasped it suddenly and stumbled down the library ladder. Over the side of the hull dangled a whole series of strings, still fastened to the wood at the stern. He placed it on top of the cabinet in the center of the room and went back to his seat without a word.

Tarrant explained the obvious. "The main support of the harp is boat-shaped," he stated, "and it possesses no front pillar. It is only necessary to re-attach the strings, hidden behind the frame when it was on the cornice, to the forward end of the frame. And, of course, to remove the mast. I noticed that small hole on the inside of the framework when I first saw the harp. And it puzzled me. I am familiar with the Egyptian *nanga*, of which this is certainly an example, and I had never seen one with such an aperture. It looked new, too."

"I was puzzled by it until the evening of the second disappearance. For I had taken an inventory of this room when I first arrived and there were eighteen boats on the cornice when the harp was in its cabinet. But on that evening one of the boats was taken from the library; I saw it done. Yet, with the harp gone, there were still eighteen boats in the room, as I immediately ascertained. One less harp, one extra boat. A trip up the ladder showed what had happened.

"That fact itself did not reveal the criminal. You have perhaps sought to remember who has been present on the occasions of these happenings. At one point I constructed such a list and I can recite it to you from memory:

First disappearance	Daben, Molla Daben, Stuart, Torpington
First reappearance	Molla Daben, Stuart, Brinkerstall
Second disappearance	Daben, Molla Daben, Stuart, Brinkerstall
Second reappearance	Daben, Molla Daben, Stuart
Third disappearance	Daben, Molla Daben, Stuart, Brinkerstall, Torpington, Mrs. Torpington

"You will observe that two names occur in every instance, those of Molla Daben and Stuart." He stopped as Stuart half rose in his chair with an inarticulate cry. "Sit down!" he commanded sharply. The secretary collapsed again in his seat.

"But even supposing one of them to have fathomed the means of opening this door," Tarrant's voice continued, "*neither of them could have been responsible*. On the evening of the second vanishing both of them sat at a bridge table with me from the time Daben came out of this room and told us the harp was still here until the moment when, with them, I discovered it had gone. As to this occasion I realized of my own knowledge that they were innocent; there was no need or reason to suspect them on the other occasions. Brinkerstall was in the same position, Torpington was not here at all then."

His voice ceased and he stood watching the expressions in the room. For the moment they were all blank with the attention of following his reasoning. Then gradually the inevitable conclusion commenced to twist them. Brinkerstall, jerking round toward the desk, began to rasp: "Why, of—" And caught himself sharply. Tarrant's tone, as he took up again, was edged with contempt.

"Yes, Daben is the man who has been desecrating his own inheritance, that priceless relic that is his legitimate property! By means of his juggling he has been playing upon the traditions his wife cherishes and fears, attempting to cause her breakdown, trying to get her out of the country. And he nearly succeeded. The third disappearance alone, even unaccompanied by my death in this room at the same time, would have been sufficient. Dr. Torpington would have insisted. With my own murder in addition, there could have been no question.

"I know, you see, what instrument Mr. Brinkerstall has been opposing Molla's signing. It was a power of attorney made out to her husband for use during her absence. And he didn't really need it, there was no excuse at all; his own fortune is more or less intact, as I found out. I am afraid he has just that appetitive personality type, based on hunger and later transferred to money, of which I have read quite recently. He is so excellent an example, in fact, that he plays his deceptive roles even when he believes himself unobserved."

He had been watching Daben who, during these words, had sat perfectly still, his expression unchanged.

Now Daben spoke. He said quietly, "Tarrant, you're crazy. I could have accomplished these disappearances no more than the others.

Once, according to your own list, I wasn't even here. All you have done is to clear us all, and we are right back at the inexplicable."

"Stop it," answered Tarrant. "Stop hoping. You forget that I was fully conscious when you came in here at half past five this morning and did your trick again. I watched you, but it only confirmed what I already knew.

"Don't think there is an alternative for any of the other occasions; there is no possibility except you. The first reappearance was the first time I was here. What you did was to enter the library alone, take the harp from the cornice, restring it, and put it in the cabinet. You then got one of the boats from your workshop and took it to the library. You had time; it was a full half hour between your first entrance to this room, which I saw, and your arrival at my room. You weren't spending all that time lost in astonishment before the cabinet. That lapse of time turned my attention to you immediately, but I admit I dismissed you a bit afterwards. The harp reappeared *after* your arrival home, not, as you pretended, while you were away.

"When it vanished a second time, you dismantled it before you came out of the library with your boat, knowing that no one could get in until you returned and knowing we would accept your statement that the harp was intact when you had left. Later you made an opening for the suggestion of a final inspection, which you opposed only enough to escape suspicion. And when you finally opened the door, you feigned the same bewilderment as the others.

"As to its subsequent reappearance, I went away and left you with all the opportunity you wanted, to get it back in the cabinet and ready for the final act, to be played on my return. Naturally, despite your proposal of keeping me company, I knew you would find some excuse, sooner or later, for leaving me to watch alone. So I helped you with the excuse, that's all. We know what happened then.

"Why did you ask me here in the first place? That is simple, surely. You wanted the testimony of an independent investigator who would be as baffled as your wife; or better yet, who would furnish a corpse for the vengeance of the 'banshees,' if he turned out to be clever enough to see through your tricks.

"And I think that is all."

The voice that came from the girl's chair was low and firm. And utterly hopeless. "Oh," she said. "Oh, my God."

It just reached Tarrant's ears and suddenly he felt an over-

whelming pity for her, with not only the man but with all that he stood for crumbling beneath her.

He called "Molla!" abruptly. "You have taken it well. *Your* traditions are still unsmirched. Don't forget now who you are! . . . You will not be entirely alone," he added, less sharply. "No young man, ordinarily unruffled at the bridge table, can play so fatuously as your partner without giving his feelings away pretty completely." For an instant Stuart failed to perceive the implication; when he did, even in that room at that moment his answer was the confirmation of a furious blush.

And still Daben sat staring stonily before him. When the silence had grown almost unbearable, he said: "I realize that you can prove your charges. I shall not commit the final cowardice of denying them further. But I beg you not to spread my name, the name of my family, across the common pages of this country's yellow journals. To be read and gloated over by every tabloid monger in the subways, by every yokel at the crossroads. If you are a gentleman yourself, I beg you to leave me the honorable way."

He looked at Tarrant as calmly as if he had just invited the latter to dinner. Or made any other ordinary pronouncement.

And Tarrant answered him equally calmly. "I suppose you still consider yourself a gentleman. . . . It is not because of your family, which you have brought to disgrace, that I will entertain your suggestion. It is simply because I myself have a certain attachment to the principles which your wife honors and which your own actions, if not your speech, have belied. I have no objection to cheating the herd of its dish of scandal; but I recognize, as you have not, that my attitude carries with it the strictest of obligations. *You* are not better than the commonest of men; by your betrayal of your own position you are inestimably worse. . . . You will recall that from the beginning of this episode I have insisted upon my freedom of choice throughout. At its end I am my own master and can choose. . . . You will find what you need where I left it for you, in the first drawer at your right hand."

The little pellet which Donatelli Daben lifted, between forefinger and thumb of a hand that was steady, looked absurdly small. Nobody made a motion or seemed to draw a breath as he put it into his mouth. Irrelevantly a jingle was running through Tarrant's brain:

"When Breogan Harpe thrice shall elude

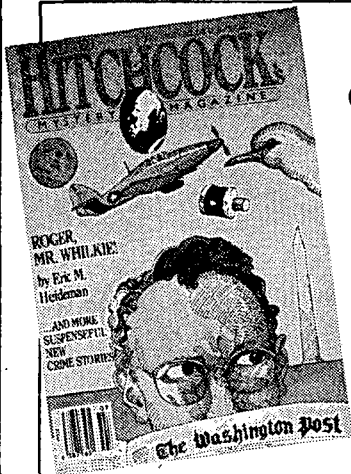
The guardian that to harpe be trowed,
Then shall the race of Dabheoin eande."

Daben stiffened and slumped heavily over the desk.
And Molla was on her feet, swaying. She said dreamily. "The
prophecy. It *has* come true."

Stuart was just in time to catch her as she crumpled forward.

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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



CHARLOTTE MACLEOD

It's been almost ten years since I picked up a novel titled *Rest You Merry*, and found myself totally charmed. The tale was set at Christmas-time (and the book sells again every Yuletide, I would imagine) in a small college town in Massachusetts called Balaclava Junction. No such place exists, of course, outside of Charlotte MacLeod's fertile imagination. No such place would have the *temerity* to exist in real life.

Balaclava Junction's main attraction—and industry—is the old and reputable Balaclava Agricultural College, a private institution long on history and well-stocked with eccentrics. Even when one considers the attractions academic life holds for fiercely in-

dependent "characters," one cannot deny that Balaclava Agricultural College is staffed—and attended—by more than its share of lovable oddballs.

In that category certainly falls our amateur detective and hero, Professor Peter Shandy, apparently a confirmed bachelor and a longtime teacher. Peter is impeccably orderly and has a passion for counting things, two traits which—surprisingly—greatly increase his chances of successful detecting. Like all good detectives, Peter is also inquisitive and persistent. Thus, when he finds the body of the college's biggest busybody on his living room floor, he cannot ignore a couple of discrepancies in the police scenario, or agree with their verdict of accidental death. When a suspected poi-

soning is followed by a case of campus arson, Peter's original suspicions are rather obviously confirmed. But the actual detecting still has to be done, and in this venture Peter is happily aided by his own Watson, an attractive and recent addition to the faculty, one Helen Marsh. Helen is, as it turns out, propitiously placed in the college library, the source of some of the evildoing. But I don't want to give the game away, for *Rest You Merry* is a treat awaiting those of you who haven't already partaken. It's also the best place to start reading the half dozen Shandy chronicles.

Other denizens of Balaclava deserve mention here because they repeatedly pop up in Shandy's adventures. There's Tim Ames, Peter's old friend and fellow professor, who shares with Peter the laurels they have both received for discovering an especially blessed strain of rutabaga. There are other assorted faculty members and "townies," as well as the fair Helen. My favorites, though, are the college president and his wife, Thorjkeld and Sieglinde Svenson, both blond giants with strong opinions and speech patterns that betray their Scandinavian origins. If their names amuse you, prepare to be further amused because MacLeod delights in dubbing her characters with implausi-

ble names. Consider the well-endowed coed named Heidi Hayhoe, or the estimable Hilda Horsefall, or Henry Hodger and Ruth Smuth and Chief Ottermole. Then there's the college founder himself, Balaclava Buggins, and environs known as Oozak Pond and Lumpkins Corners, and even the rutabaga, called Balaclava Buster. An impish play on words and a generous dash of wit lend MacLeod mysteries their trademark—sheer fun.

Look for the most recent novel, *The Corpse in Oozak's Pond*, in hardcover yet a while (Mysterious Press, \$15.95, 213 pp.). Spring rites on campus include an outing to see if the resident hedgehog, Balaclava Beauregard, is going to spot his shadow. But a corpse bobs up from beneath the icecakes floating on the nearby pond and steals the hedgehog's thunder. The corpse, dressed in antique clothes, bears an uncanny likeness to the college's founder. It's a roaring start for Shandy's latest case.

In addition to *Rest You Merry*, MacLeod's other Peter Shandy mysteries are available in Avon paperback editions: *The Luck Runs Out*, *Wrack and Rune*, *Something the Cat Dragged In*, and *The Curse of the Giant Hogweed*. Shandy also appears in a collection of MacLeod's short stories titled *Grab Bag*, also an Avon paperback, which gives

you the opportunity to sample the author's tales featuring other detectives who star in their own series of books.*

Charlotte MacLeod, by the

way, also writes detective stories under the pseudonym Alisa Craig. Her fans grow with every new book she writes, and deservedly so.

**Grab Bag* includes two stories originally published in AHMM: "Fifty Acres of Prime Seaweed" (called in our pages "The Unlikely Demise of Cousin Claude") and "The Mysterious Affair of the Bearded-Wynnington Dirigible Airship."—ED.

MYSTERY REVIEWS

A few months ago this column profiled British author John Greenwood and his estimable detective, Inspector Mosley. Greenwood died last year, but he left a legacy of several unpublished novels. Walker has recently published one of them, **Mists Over Mosley** (\$15.95, 186 pp.). Mosley is something of a mystery himself, an apparently colorless small-town copper whose eccentric ways drive his superiors wild. One of those senior officers, Grimshaw, is therefore flabbergasted to be ordered to assign Mosley to investigate complaints that three local women are practicing witchcraft—and with some success, it seems. Then Grimshaw is let into the secret: a quiet investigation is being conducted into the affairs of a powerful local politician, and no one wants Mosley nosing around *that*. All is well and good until murder strikes the tiny town—and nothing brings out Mosley's uncanny talents like murder right on his own patch. Look for wonderfully drawn characters, a strong plot, and the author's wry touch in this fourth Mosley mystery in the series.

The author of *When the Bough Breaks*, Jonathan Kellerman, has reprised his child-psychologist-turned-amateur-detective in **Blood Test** (Signet, \$4.50, 345 pp.). This definitely qualifies for the term "thriller," but it's not a book for the squeamish. Hero Alex Delaware, whose inherited wealth has allowed him to "retire" early from his psychology practice, is asked to come back to the hospital to treat a special case. A small boy with terminal cancer can be cured, but his parents are refusing the treatment. Alex agrees to act as consultant, but before he can make any progress the child is kidnapped—and the parents turn up murdered. A dizzying chase takes the therapist into some of the sleazier strata of California, from sex shops to hideaway health cults, and down into the even darker passages of a family's secrets. This isn't for the traditional-mystery fan, though.

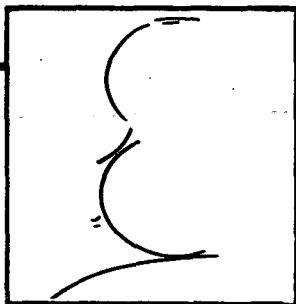
More conventional is Sarah Kemp's **What Dread Hand** (Doubleday Crime Club, \$12.95, 179 pp.). There our heroine is a scholar-pathologist, star of a hit TV show in England, who finds herself suffering from a bout of nerves following her involvement in a gruesome traffic accident. A friend lends her an isolated cottage in a small Cornish village for her recovery—which doesn't seem imminent when her arrival is marked by a gift left on her doorstep, a hatbox with a human head in it. Antonia Fraser's **Jemima Shore** has nothing on Dr. Tina May for good looks, brains, independence, and high TV ratings, although Tina's predicament may seem more gothic-heroine-in-peril than Jemima's ever is.

William Marshall fans should know that that clever author has written **Manila Bay** (Viking, \$15.95, 215 pp.), and has moved it miles away from Hong Kong, site of the wonderful Yellowthread Street mysteries. In this new book the setting is the capital of the Philippines, where the sport (or so its fans deem it to be) of cock-fighting is a national pastime, and a very big business for bookies. Here's a new city and a new cast of characters, introduced with Marshall's unique blend of zany antics and brutal violence, all served up at a breakneck pace. It's a combination I find irresistible.

An Advancement of Learning is Reginald Hill's latest in paperback, another British police procedural featuring the unlikely team of Superintendent Dalziel and his usually incompatible sergeant, Peter Pascoe. The two are out of their usual element here, conducting their investigation at the scene of the crime, which just happens to be a small, reputable private college. The premise is an intriguing one. When a life-sized statue has to be moved for a building project, the workmen find the buried corpse of a faculty member who was believed to have been felled five years earlier by an Austrian avalanche. Obviously the poor woman never got to her vacation spot at all, and it's up to the C.I.D. to learn what really happened. (Signet, \$2.95, 255 pp.)

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



This past April, in an AHMM Guest Editorial, Chris Steinbrunner called attention to the movie version of Agatha Christie's novel, **Ordeal by Innocence** (1958). Never given a theatrical release, the movie went straight from the Mystfest film festival in Italy, where Chris viewed it, to American cable TV and videocassettes. When we tracked it down at our local video outlet, we found a nicely directed, relatively thoughtful, British-made version of the book. To our surprise, it was a movie featuring several first-rate actors: Faye Dunaway, Sarah Miles, Christopher Plummer, and Donald Sutherland.

When Dr. Arthur Calgary, played as an American by Sutherland, returns from a two year expedition to the Arctic, he learns that just after he went away a young man was convicted of murder because he,

Calgary, could not be found to testify on his behalf. Calgary, a precise, scientific type, clearly recalls giving the young man a lift at exactly the time the murder took place. But when Calgary goes to tell the family of the now deceased Jack Argyle that he was innocent, they are not at all happy to receive his news.

Everyone at the Argyle place acts strangely: the father, Leo, who was evidently having an affair with his live-in secretary at the time of his wife's murder; the convicted Jack Argyle's two sisters and brother; their husbands and wife; Jack's wife in a secret marriage that came out only after he was arrested; the longtime housekeeper and family retainer, Kirsten Lindstrom; and Superintendent Huish, whose reputation will be hurt by Calgary's evidence that he had arrested the wrong man.

As the circumstances on the night of the murder begin to emerge, it grows clear that no intruder could have killed Mrs. Argyle; the murderer must be someone within the Argyle family circle. It develops that this circle is not all it seems. The brothers and sister turn out to have been adopted by the barren Mrs. Argyle. The now dead Jack Argyle was a petty criminal probably capable of killing Mrs. Argyle, and in any case a troublemaker and sponger understandably not missed by anyone in the family.

Despite rebuffs, Dr. Calgary undertakes to uncover the murderer, which he succeeds in doing nearly at the cost of his own life, and only after two more members of the Argyle circle have been killed and the rest of the family emotionally damaged. The innocent have been made to undergo an ordeal, as Agatha Christie's title suggests, and in the end Calgary must shoulder the guilt of what he has put them through.

In the novel there is no such derring-do on Calgary's part as in the movie. His life is never in danger and Superintendent Huish cooperates with, rather than impedes, his investigation. Nor is Calgary menaced by a series of eccentric family members as in the movie. In fact, Dr. Calgary is absent from much of Christie's novel while

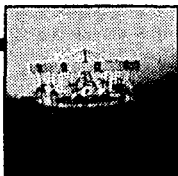
Superintendent Huish chases down the clues.

Christie's idea was to take a sensitive family and subject it to an ordeal of doubt that would serve not only to flush out a murderer but also to test their relationships with one another. These testings produce some painful results, but they also serve to uncover false relationships and kindle new loves in their place. Agatha Christie is clear both that the family's ordeal is worth the personal knowledge it brings to its members, and that justice must be done even at the expense of suffering.

Since the producers of *Ordeal by Innocence* never succeeded in selling it to a commercial movie distributor, it seems to us that the lesson for them to learn is that they might as well have stuck to the Agatha Christie original. To be sure, the original is a leisurely study of an only slightly unusual family with just one bad egg in it: Jack Argyle. But for movie-going mystery enthusiasts it is not always necessary to heighten the action.

By sticking closer to Christie's subtler, quieter original, the makers of *Ordeal by Innocence* might have appealed to the kind of audience that reads Agatha Christie—one made up of some millions of readers.

THE STORY THAT WON



Arthur Treas

The March Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Steve Wilson of Minot AFB, North Dakota. Honorable mentions go to Jim Fitzgerald of Atlanta, Georgia; Art Cosing of Arlington, Virginia; Sid Kingdon of Northbrook, Illinois; Joan Folmer of McSherrystown, Pennsylvania; Katherine Latham von Physter of San Diego, California; Stephen J. Sommer of Thiells, New York; Michael C. McPherson of Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada; I. Bernard of New York, New York; Ann Curtis of Checotah, Oklahoma; Myrah Coleman of South Gate, California; George H. Thompson, Jr., of Raymond, California; Diane M. Hollingsworth of La Junta, Colorado; and Robert Gonzales and Tony Philips of Hartville, Ohio.

MISSING MABEL by Steve Wilson

Ten miles south of town I pulled over at a four-way intersection and searched for the coffee can as ordered. Sure enough, the can was propped against a fence post. Tucked inside it was a note. All it said was "Head west."

How paranoid was this guy? For over two hours I had been driving from note to note. Surely he had already determined that I was alone. Yet if I wanted Mabel back I had to follow the instructions and pay the ransom.

I drove west for five minutes, then I passed over a small hill and saw what I was looking for. In a small field next to the road sat Mabel—my merry-go-round. On top of Old Paint, my favorite wooden steed, sat a short, pudgy man. "You the guy who lost the merry-go-round?" he called as I stepped out of my pickup.

"Lost?" I said, astonished at his audacity. "You stole it."

"Harsh words, Mr. Gardner."

"Don't talk to me about harsh words. I don't know how you did it, but you stole Mabel from my carnival."

"You named your merry-go-round?"

"Let's just get this over." I pulled ten hundred dollar bills out of my wallet and handed them to the man.

"Thank you, Mr. Gardner. Now let's talk about the Ferris wheel you're missing."

"But I'm not missing a Ferris wheel."

"Mr. Gardner, you've been driving around for over two hours. A lot can happen in two hours."

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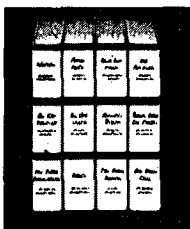
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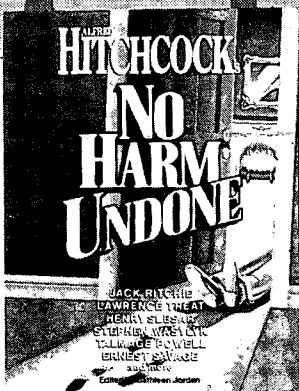
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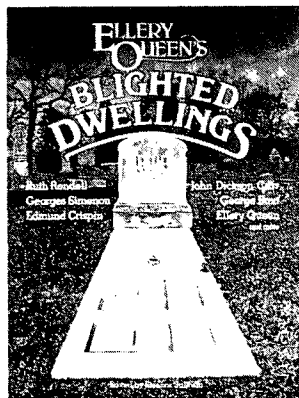
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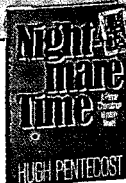
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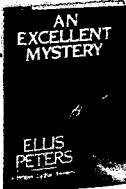
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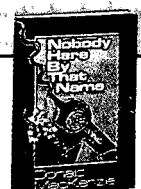
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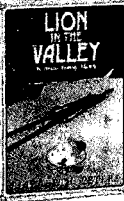
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